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THE LADY'S MILE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER

WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

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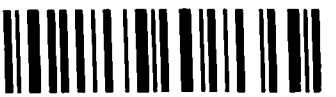
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CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	Mrs. Lobyer's Skeleton	1
II.	"How should I greet thee?"	50
III.	Between Carthage and Kensington	85
IV.	The Easy Descent	119
V.	A Modern Love-chase	152
VI.	"He comes too near, who comes to be denied"	167
VII.	"Were all thy Letters Suns, I could not see"	193
VIII.	A Timely Warning	206
IX.	"He's sweetest Friend, or hardest Foe"	221
X.	On the Brink	232
XI.	By the Sea	268
XII.	A Commercial Earthquake	289
	The Epilogue	327

cover of a small mould of some black compound, which the attendant offering it explained in a low voice as "plum-pudding." In Mr. Lobyer's drawing-room it might have been midsummer; for the fires at each end of the spacious chamber were hidden by great Parian screens, through which the red blaze shed only a rosy glow, like the low sunlight in a summer evening sky; and the atmosphere was odorous with the scent of roses and myrtles, hyacinth and myosotis, blooming in *jardinières* of ormolu and buhl, or fading in tall slender vases of fragile glass. The possessor of a million of money is the earthly incarnation of Zeus. At his bidding the summer fruits ripen at Christmas time; for his pleasure the nipping winter becomes a "time of roses." It is not to be expected, therefore, that the millionaire should put himself out of the way because the common herd chooses to be joyful; or that he should embrace dowagers under a vulgar mistletoe bough, and burn his fingers in the extraction of indigestible raisins from a dish of blazing spirits.

Nothing in Mr. Lobyer's manner on this particular twenty-fifth of December betrayed the faintest sympathy with those genial emotions common to the vulgar at this season of the year. He appeared in the drawing-room about five minutes before dinner, faultlessly attired in evening costume, and carrying his familiar—a fawn-coloured pug—in one of his big strong hands. Cecil found her host leaning against one of the mantelpieces, in his accustomed attitude, and caressing this brute, with a moody countenance, when she entered the drawing-room. He did the honours of the dinner-table in his usually graceful manner; and those amiable people who were never weary of sounding their host's praises in his character of a rough diamond, found him peculiarly delightful this evening; he was so quaint, so original, they said to each other confidentially, as the millionaire let fall some cynical remark now and then in the course of the banquet.

He seemed very glad to get back to the fawn-coloured familiar, which was snoring peacefully, half-buried in a fleecy rug, when the gentlemen

returned to the drawing-room. He lifted the animal by one ear, and retired with it into the depths of an easy-chair, whence might be heard occasional growlings and snappings as the evening proceeded.

"I am afraid that gray shirtings were not lively," Florence whispered to Cecil, as the two ladies were preparing themselves for a duet.

At ten o'clock those splendid creatures, the matched footmen, were summoned to wheel the *jardinières* and *étagères* away from the centre of the room, while Lady Cecil and a young masculine pianist seated themselves at the instrument to play quadrilles and waltzes for a carpet-dance. It was at the same hour that Mr. Lobyer emerged from the depths of his easy-chair, flung the fawn-coloured animal into a corner, and walked towards one of the doors.

"Come and have a smoke in the billiard-room, Chapman," he said to one of his commercial friends, a bald-headed, warm-looking man, of whom the county people never took the faintest notice. Departing with this gentleman in his

wake, Mr. Lobyer was seen no more among his guests that evening; and the carpet-dance went merrily; and a million stars shone brightly over Povenshall out of a frosty blue sky, while midnight melted into morning; and the belle of the great drawing-room was bright, fair-haired coquettish little Mrs. Lobyer. But the Christmas night came and went, and the bride of six months had no loving husband to take her hands in his and say, "God bless you, my darling, on this night above all nights of the year, and in all the days and nights to come!"

Sir Nugent Evershed made his appearance before luncheon on the twenty-sixth of December, with Scribe's comedy in his hand, much to the astonishment of his cousin Grace.

"Jeffs must have been very rapid," she said. "He generally keeps me longer when I send for any thing."

"I didn't depend upon Jeffs," answered the Baronet; "I rode over to Chiverley after leaving here the night before last, and telegraphed to the

Rue Vivienne. It was as easy to telegraph to Levy as to write to Jeffs, and I had set my heart on bringing the comedy to-day." He looked at Mrs. Lobyer rather than his cousin as he said this; but the two ladies were standing side by side, and a man's eyes may take the wrong direction unconsciously.

After luncheon, the party interested in the amateur theatricals adjourned to the morning room, where Sir Nugent read the comedy, and where the arrangement of the characters was decided. Mrs. Lobyer was to play the heroine, the most bewitching of young widows; and Sir Nugent was to be the Marquis, poor, and reckless, and proud, but passionately attached to the bewitching young widow. Miss Grace Evershed consented to perform a malicious dowager, who made mischief between the spendrift Marquis and the bewitching widow; and the rest of the cast was made up by a country squire, who had finished his education at Bonn, and spoke the French language as taught by German masters; and two of Mr. Lobyer's London friends, of the fast and flip-

pant school, who appeared to be proficient in every modern language, and skilled in every art except that of keeping out of debt. One of the officers from Chiverley, who was known to be strong in the Thespian art, was requested to take a part in the piece, but he declined with a regretful sigh.

"I shall be in the wilds of Kerry when your performance comes off," he said; "our fellows are ordered off to Tralee on the tenth, and the 11th Plungers come into our quarters. I've often growled about the dreariness of Chiverley, but how I shall envy those fellows,—the queer old English town, and Pevenshall Place within an hour's ride! Do people LIVE in such a place as Tralee? I have a sort of idea that we shall be surrounded by savage natives, and scalped on the night of our arrival. What luck the 11th have had in India! That young Gordon, whose father has such mints of money, has won a step within the last few months. That skirmish at Burradal-choodah made a Major of him."

Cecil felt the blood rush to her face for a moment, and then a sick faintness came over her;

and the brightly-furnished room spun round before her eyes, until it seemed as if she had been sitting amidst a whirlpool of light and colour. The low-toned voices and the light laughter clashed upon her ears like the noise of cymbals; but it was only for a moment. Womanly dignity came to her rescue after the first brief shock of surprise; and when Grace Evershed appealed to her presently, upon some frivolous question, she was able to answer with unfaltering tones.

"What is he to me," she thought, "or what can he ever be to me? And why should I be startled by hearing that he is likely to be within a few miles of the house in which I am staying?"

And then she began to consider whether her visit at Pevenshall could not reasonably come to an end very speedily. Florence had asked her friend to come to her for a long time, and as yet Cecil had been little more than ten days in Yorkshire; but then, as Mr. O'Boyneville was unable to leave London, his wife had a very good reason for returning thither.

While Cecil was thinking of this, the talk was going on round her, and presently she heard Sir Nugent Evershed talking of Hector Gordon.

"He is a splendid fellow," said the Baronet; "I met him in Germany six years ago, and we saw a great deal of each other. He is the kind of man we want in India; the real Napier breed; the man who doesn't know when he is beaten. I was with him in a revolutionary row at Heidelberg. Gad! how he fought! The students wanted to chair him after the squabble; but he wouldn't stand any nonsense of that kind! What a night we made of it afterwards! There was a mad-brained fellow who fancied himself a poet, a brace of transcendentalists, and Gordon and I. I remember our sitting in the balcony of the hotel, drinking Rhine wine and talking metaphysics long after midnight, when the last twinkling light in the queer old city had been extinguished and every roof and steeple stood out clear and sharp in the moonlight. Gordon must be a glorious fellow, if he hasn't degenerated since then. We used to call him the Scottish lion in those days. The girls

and old women came to their windows to stare at him as he strode along the miserable pavements, with his long auburn hair flying loose about his neck. I shall be very glad if he comes my way this winter; though I'm sorry they're going to send you fellows to Tralee, Foster."

The Pevenshall party were more interested in the costumes they were to wear for the comedy than in the merits of Major Gordon; so no more was said about that gentleman. Sir Nugent was intrusted with the duty of writing to a London costumier who would provide the masculine attire, and he further engaged himself to procure a set of coloured lithographs from which the ladies might choose their dresses. Having accepted these commissions, he departed; but not before he had received an invitation to dinner for the following day from Mr. Lobyer, who came into the morning-room before the party broke up, and who seemed, so far as in him lay, to be amiably disposed towards his visitors and the world in general.

Cecil left the drawing-room early that even-

ing, in order to write some letters in her own apartment. She wrote a long gossiping epistle to her husband, telling him of the Pevenshall gaieties, the pending amateur theatricals, any thing and every thing which she thought likely to interest him, just for the few minutes during which he read her letter. It was not because the great barrister was busy and could only write brief scrawls to his wife that she should therefore curtail her letters to him. She was so earnestly anxious to do her duty—even if duty was now and then a little tiresome.

"And yet I doubt whether he will be able to take his mind away from all that horrible law-business, even while he reads my letter," she thought, as she concluded her missive.

In the course of the letter she had expressed her desire to return to London.

"I am amongst very pleasant people here, but do not like to stay so long away from home," she wrote, and she gave a faint sigh as she wrote the word 'home;' "and as you find it impossible to join me here, I think I had better return to

Brunswick Square early next week. You wished me to have change of air and scene; and any benefit I am likely to receive from them I have already secured. You know how little I care for gaiety, and how very comfortable I am with my books and piano. Let me have a line please, dear Laurence, by return of post, to say I may come back at the beginning of the week."

Florence peeped into her friend's room before retiring for the night, and Cecil told her of the letter she had been writing.

"I think if Mr. O'Boyneville cannot come down, I must go back to London next week, dear," she said.

But Florence declared such an arrangement utterly impossible.

"You have come to me, and I mean to keep you," she said. "You come here for change of scene, and then you talk of running back to that hideous Bloomsbury after a fortnight, and you even talk of going before our comedy. It is positively preposterous. Ah, I ought to have insisted on your taking a part in it. But I shall

write to Mr. O'Boyneville myself if you are rebellious, and ask him to put his veto against your return."

"But, my dear Florence, you must know that I ought not to be so long away from home."

"I know nothing of the kind. In the last letter you showed me, Mr. O'Boyneville said he was delighted to think you were enjoying yourself here, and that he was up to his eyes in business. What can a man who is up to his eyes in business want with a wife?"

After this there were many discussions upon the same subject, and Cecil found that it was not at all easy to get away from Pevenshall, especially as she received a letter from Mr. O'Boyneville begging her to stay as long as she liked with her friends, and promising to run down for a day or two and escort her back to town if she stayed until the beginning of February. So there was nothing for her to do but to stay; and, after all, what substantial reason was there for her hurried departure? What was it to her if Hector Gordon came to Chiverley with

his regiment? Was his coming to be a reason for her running away from the county? It was just possible that the officers of the coming regiment might be visitors at Pevenshall, as the officers of the departing regiment had been; but what did it matter to Lady Cecil O'Boyneville where or when she met her old acquaintance of the little Hampshire watering-place?

Such was the tenor of Cecil's thoughts when she thought at all of Major Gordon; but after once having resolved to remain at Pevenshall until the natural termination of her visit, she tried to banish all thought of Hector and his possible coming from her mind. She abandoned herself to the frivolities of Mrs. Lobyer's circle, and found those frivolities very pleasant in their way. If it was a useless life—and in a manner sinful by reason of its utter uselessness—it was at least very agreeable while the freshness of youth lasted; and Cecil had seen, in the person of her aunt, that such frivolities may be tolerably agreeable to age. But in spite of all the brightness and gaiety of Mrs. Lobyer's life, Cecil found

herself pitying her friend rather than envying her.

"Surely the day must come when she will be tired of it all," thought the barrister's wife, when Flo had been delighting every body by her vivacity. "She has too many pleasures, and too much splendour and luxury. She seems to me like a feminine Xerxes, and sooner or later she must grow tired of every mortal enjoyment, and cry out wearily for some new pleasure. How tired Cleopatra must have been of every thing upon earth when she drank that melted pearl!—surely only a little less tired than when she made an end of her life with the asp. And Solomon—what unutterable weariness there is in every line of that wonderful book in which he laments the emptiness and barrenness of his life! I cannot help thinking of these things when I see Flo hurrying from one amusement to another; from a hunting breakfast at home to a morning concert at Chiverley; and then for an hour's shopping in which she spends a small fortune upon things she doesn't want; and then

home to meet fresh visitors at dinner; and then charades, or *tableaux vivants*, or a carpet-dance. She must grow tired of all this at last; but before that time, this perpetual excitement will have become a habit, and society will be necessary to her, as it is to my aunt. I remember that line of Pope's:

'And round and round the ghosts of beauty glide.'

What a picture it conjures up! Who would not prefer a home and home duties to that perpetual round of pleasures which so soon cease to please?"

And then Lady Cecil thought of the big dingy house in Bloomsbury, and wondered whether the serenity and quiet cheerfulness of the ideal home would ever pervade that dismal mansion. She had hung birds in the southern windows, and had bought rustic baskets of flowers, and perfumed caskets, and workboxes, for the adornment of the dingy drawing-rooms; but she had not been able as yet to impart that homelike aspect to Mr. O'Boyneville's dwelling for which her soul yearned.

The Pevenshall visitors were busy with the preparations for the comedy. The billiard-room

was given up to rehearsals; the billiard-table was pushed into a dark corner, much to the annoyance of Mr. Lobyer, who fled in despair to Manchester. There was a rehearsal every day during the fortnight preceding the eventful evening; for it is astonishing how much rehearsing one of Scribe's comedies requires when the performers are pretty girls and elegant young men. The business might have been managed in less time, perhaps, had there not been considerable hindrance of one kind and another to the steady progress of the affair. There was one day upon which the arrival of a box of powdered wigs from London interrupted the course of rehearsal, and ultimately put a stop to it, for Mrs. Lobyer having run away to try on her wig, the other ladies followed her example, and then the gentlemen were seized with a like curiosity as to the effect of powder; and there was a general trying on of wigs, all of which were pronounced by the wearers to be hideously ugly and cruelly disappointing; for the effect of a powdered wig, combined with modern costume, in the chill winter sunlight, is by no means agree-

able. Other rehearsals were interrupted by little squabbles about stage arrangements: for Sir Nugent Eversheed and the West-end club-men were at variance upon many points; while one of the latter gentlemen was inclined to give himself airs upon the strength of having assisted at the getting up of the *School for Scandal* at the Countess of Warlinghame's place at Twickenham; and then there was time lost by reason of feminine gigglings; and particular people were missing at important moments; and there was a great deal of trying back, and perpetual disputations as to entrances and exits. But it was altogether very delightful, and every one seemed to enjoy him or herself amazingly. Mr. Lobyer, looking into the billiard-room sometimes in the course of the morning, was wont to make some contemptuous remark upon the occupation of his wife and her guests, before taking his flight to Manchester. And so the days went by, until the last rehearsal took place on the evening prior to the performance, and every body was pronounced perfect in the words of the airiest and most delightful of

modern dramatists. The dresses had arrived, after the prospective wearers had endured unspeakable tortures from the fear of their non-arrival. The stage was erected in the billiard-room, and never was temporary theatre more complete in its arrangements. Mrs. Lobyer's spirits rose with the prospect of her triumph; and Mr. Lobyer grew more disdainfully indifferent to his wife's folly as the important moment drew near.

The sixteenth of January was to be altogether a very grand day at Pevenshall. There was to be a hunt-breakfast in the morning, a dinner-party in the evening; after the dinner the private theatricals; and after that display of amateur talent a ball, at which the performers in the comedy were to appear in their stage-dresses. So far as Mr. Lobyer could be interested in any thing but the money-market, he was interested in the hunt-breakfast and the dinner, at both of which entertainments the men of his own set were to muster in full force. The master of Pevenshall had the chance of pleasure at a very early period of his existence, and not being gifted

with a very large stock of vivacity, had speedily exhausted the effervescence of his nature. For the last few years of his life all the force of his mind, all the energy of his character, had been directed towards the one end and aim of the successful trader. To make twenty per cent where other men were making fifteen; to anticipate the future of the money-market; to foreshadow the influence of coming events, and to enrich himself by such foresight, — for this Mr. Lobyer spent his days in meditation, and his sleepless nights in care and anguish. But he was still capable, in his own stolid way, of taking some kind of pleasure out of the splendour of his surroundings, the skill of his cook, the perfection of his wines, and the homage which he received from the minions of the money-market. He felt a grim satisfaction in the knowledge that his wife was beautiful, and that other men admired her and envied him because he was her husband. If he had been an Oriental potentate, he would have taken to himself a hundred wives—not so much for his own happiness as in the hope that other

potentates who could boast only fifty wives would envy him the delights of his harem. Not being an Oriental potentate, he had done the best he could in uniting himself to the prettiest woman and the most insolent coquette he had encountered. He had gratified himself, to the annoyance and mortification of other people. From his childhood he had been fully alive to the advantage of being the son of a millionaire, of having been in a manner born in the commercial purple; and the desire of his life had been that all his belongings should be infinitely superior to the belongings of other people. If another millionaire had arisen in the county, and had built for himself a larger place than Pevenshall, Mr. Lobyer would have commissioned Messrs. Foster to dispose of Pevenshall to the highest bidder, and would have erected a nobler and bigger mansion than the palace of the new millionaire. It is just possible that Thomas Lobyer had some vague consciousness that, considered apart from his money, he was a paltry and detestable creature; and that he was therefore eager to make the most of the

glamour which splendid surroundings can impart to the meanest object. Aladdin playing in the streets and bye-ways of the city is only the idle waif and stray of a defunct tailor; but Aladdin with the command of an orchard whose fruits are rubies and diamonds—Aladdin the tenant of the enchanted palace, and owner of the roc's egg,—is altogether another person. One fancies him arrayed in shining tissues of gold and silver, blazing with jewels; handsome, dashing, elegant, delightful—or, in one word, SUCCESSFUL; and the vulgar antecedents of the tailor's son are utterly forgotten.

Mr. Lobyer was neither an exacting nor a tyrannical husband. He had secured for himself the best thing in wives, as he had the best thing in horses and modern pictures and dogs. If he held her a little lower than his short-legged hunter, a little less dear than his fawn-coloured pug, he at least gave her as much as she had any right to expect from him. She had married him for his money, and he gave her his money. She spent as much as she pleased; she amused

herself after her own fashion. If now and then, moved by some short-lived conscientious scruple, she made an attempt to consult him or to defer to his pleasure, Mr. Lobyer took good care to show his wife that his pleasure was in no way concerned in hers, and that to be consulted by her was to be inexpressibly bored. He let her see very plainly that she was only a part of his pomp and splendour, and that she had nothing to do but to dress herself to perfection, and excite the envy of his toadies and familiars. If he gave her costly jewels, it was in order that she might be an advertisement of his own wealth and importance; and he scowled at her if she came down to dinner in some simple girlish dress when he wanted her to swell his magnificence.

"What the doose made you stick those dam' rosebuds in your hair when Brownjohn the drysalter was over here?" he asked savagely. "What's the good of a fellow givin' you five or six thousand pounds' worth of diamonds, if you lock 'em up in your jewel-case, and dress yourself up in white muslin and blue ribbon, like a

boardin'-school miss tricked out for a dancin' lesson? Brownjohn's fat old wife had a breast-plate of diamonds that would have looked as yellow as barleysugar beside your tiara; and Brownjohn is just the sort of man to notice those things."

"But what does it matter how I am dressed?" Flo would inquire; "Mr. Brownjohn knows how rich you are."

"Perhaps he does, and perhaps he does not. You don't know those Manchester fellows; they believe in nothing except what they see; and Brownjohn knows that I have been stuck rather heavily within the last six months."

Mrs. Lobyer in her own secret soul rejoiced that she was not more intimately acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of Mr. Brownjohn and other men of his class. She had a faint idea that to be "stuck rather heavily" meant something unpleasant; but as her husband did not invite her sympathy, she did not consider herself in any way bound to be uneasy because of such unpleasantness.

If ever she thought about Mr. Lobyer's finan-

cial position, she thought of him as the owner of wealth so enormous that no mistaken adventure could exhaust or even diminish it in any palpable manner.

"I don't know why he worries himself about the money-market," she said to Cecil. "He couldn't spend any more money than he does if his income were trebled; but I suppose, after reaching a certain point, a man takes pleasure in the magnitude of his wealth without any reference to the use he can make of it. I daresay Mr. Lobyer is tired of being a millionaire—there are so many millionaires nowadays—and a man must be a billionaire if he wants to be any thing out of the common."

The sixteenth of January began very pleasantly. The breakfast went off delightfully. The gentlemen mounted their covert hacks at eleven o'clock, and rode off to the meet, accompanied by a party of blooming equestrians, with Miss Evershed for their leader, and followed by a landau filled with older and less adventurous ladies. These ladies

were only to witness the meet, for there were no Diana Vernons at Pevensball. Miss Evershed rode superbly, but professed a supreme contempt for hunting.

"I believe there was a time when a lady could hunt," she said, when the subject was discussed at the breakfast-table, "and when she knew whom she was likely to meet at covert. But that is all changed now, and we leave the sport to people who seem to enjoy it amazingly, and who can better afford to shake a valuable hunter once or twice in the season than we could."

Miss Evershed happened to be looking at her host as she gave utterance to these remarks, and over that gentleman's swarthy complexion there came a dusky tinge of crimson as he evaded the young lady's fearless gaze.

"It would be rather hard if the hunting-field wasn't free to good riders," he muttered. "I'm sure one meets plenty of bad ones there every day!"

Neither Mrs. Lobyer nor Lady Cecil were among the ladies who rode to covert; for Florence

wanted to read one particular scene in the comedy for the last time, and she begged her dear Cecil to stay at home until the afternoon, when they could drive out together.

"They've made me a new set of harness for the gray ponies," Flo said; "harness with bells. In frosty weather it quite gives one the idea of a sledge. If it were not for the hunting people, I should wish it were frosty. We can go out directly after luncheon, Cecil; and I daresay we shall meet those hunting people somewhere or other in the course of our drive. In the mean time I shall go and inflict solitary confinement upon myself while I read over that long scene with the marquis. I wonder whether Sir Nugent will be nervous. I'm sure I shall; and if we are both nervous, the scene will be a failure."

Mrs. Lobyer retired to her own apartments, and Cecil spent her morning in writing letters. She had heard no mention of Hector Gordon's name since the afternoon on which the comedy had been read by Sir Nugent Evershed; and she had done her uttermost to exclude all thought of

him from her mind. But she knew that on the 10th the Fusiliers had left for Tralee, and that on the same day the Plungers had taken possession of Chiverley Barracks. There had been some talk about these Indian heroes amongst callers at Pevenshall, but no special mention of Major Gordon. She knew that he was near her; that although it was quite possible that she might leave Yorkshire without having seen him, it was equally possible that at any moment he might appear before her—a guest in the house which sheltered her. She had been so accustomed to think of him as utterly divided from her—the inhabitant of another world—that the knowledge of his near neighbourhood affected her with a feeling that was nearly akin to terror.

"What reason have I to be afraid of him?" she asked herself again and again; but in spite of all reason she was oppressed by some kind of fear when she thought of the many chances that might bring Hector Gordon across her path.

Mrs. Lobyer was in her highest spirits at luncheon. The gentlemen were all away in the

hunting-field except Sir Nugent, who had arrived at Pevenshall an hour or two after breakfast, and had been supervising the upholsterer's men as they put the finishing touches to the theatre and dressing-rooms. He was to dine and spend the night in Mr. Lobyer's mansion. After luncheon he escorted the two ladies to their carriage, patted and admired the pretty gray ponies, and placed the reins in Mrs. Lobyer's hands.

"You'll not drive far," he said; "remember that as stage-manager I have some kind of authority; and I must beg that you don't fatigue yourself. You have your dinner to go through, you know. It will be nine o'clock before you leave the dining-room; and our performance must commence at ten. An hour is a very short time for a Pompadour toilette."

"The dinner is a horrible bore," answered Flo; "those Manchester friends of Mr. Lobyer's care for nothing but dinners; and Manchester is paramount in this house. Why can't one put one's housekeeper at the head of the table on such occasions? I'm sure Mrs. Prowen is a very lady-

like person, and I could lend her some of my diamonds. You don't know how I hate those wearisome banquets, Sir Nugent, with the eternal Palestine soup, and turbot, and haunches of mutton, and sparkling moselle, and crystallised fruit, and forced pine-apples, and wax-candles, and that stifling odour peculiar to all dining-rooms, which seems like a combination of roast meat and rose-water. But give the ponies their heads, if you please. How long am I to drive?"

She asked the question in her most charming manner, with that half-coquettish air of submission which is so delightful when evinced by a very pretty woman towards a man to whom she has no right to defer.

"An hour and a half at the uttermost," answered the Baronet, looking at his watch. "I shall be on the look-out for your return; and if you outstay your leave of absence, I shall exercise my authority as stage-manager, and condemn you to the most awful penance I can imagine. You shall play Léonie de Presles without your wig."

"That would be a very small penance; I am

sure the wig is hideously ugly, and that I shall look a perfect object in it."

"And I am sure you think no such thing, Mrs. Lobyer. I know you tried the effect of the wig last night by candle-light, and were charmed with it; yes, your blushes convict you; and Lady Cecil knows I am right."

Flo shook her head in coquettish protestation, and drove away; the bells jingling gaily in the frosty air as she went.

"Isn't he nice, Cecil?" she asked presently.

"Who, dear?"

"Sir Nugent, of course."

"Yes, he is very agreeable. But I think—"

"You think what, Cecil? Pray speak out. I can't bear people to begin sentences they can't finish."

"Perhaps you'll be offended if I speak frankly."

"O dear, no, say just what you like. It is my normal state to be lectured. People never hesitate to say what they please about me and my goings on."

"I think, dear, you are a little too much inclined to talk to him in a manner, or to let him talk to you in a manner that is almost like flirting. I know how difficult it is to draw the line between what is and what is not flirting; and I daresay you will think me very absurd, dear—"

"I don't think you at all absurd. I know that I flirt with Sir Nugent Evershed."

"Flo!"

"Do you think that I am going to pretend about it, or to dispute as to the exact shade of my iniquity? I talk to Sir Nugent, and I let him pay me compliments—of course they are the airiest and most elegant compliments, like the little epigrammatic speeches in a comedy—and I sing the songs he recommends me to sing, and I read the books he begs me to read, and I have allowed him to bring me ferns from the fernery at Howden Park; and I suppose all that constitutes a flirtation of a very abominable character. But after all, Cecil, why shouldn't I flirt, if it amuses me to do so?"

"But, Florence—"

"But, Cecil, who cares about my flirtations? Mr. Lobyer does not; and I suppose if he is satisfied, other people may let me go my own way. Mr. Lobyer likes to see Sir Nugent dancing attendance upon me, because Sir Nugent is one of the best men in the county, and his hanging about Pevenshall improves Mr. Lobyer's position *auprès de* Manchester. I know I am a very worthless creature, Cecil; but I am not utterly iniquitous; and I try to do my duty to my husband after a fashion. If I saw that my flirting annoyed him, I would turn district-visitor, and never open my lips except to talk of charity-schools and new iron churches."

"But how do you know that Mr. Lobyer is not annoyed? Some men are so reserved upon such points."

"I know that he is almost always at Manchester; and that when he is at home he is generally in the billiard- or smoking-room. Please, Cecil, don't say any more about it. There are some things that won't bear talking of. Tell

me how you like the bells; they do give you the idea of a sledge, don't they?"

Nothing could be more charming than the vivacity of Mrs. Lobyer's manner as she turned to her friend with this frivolous question; and yet only a moment before she had been very much in earnest, and the face half averted from Cecil had been a very sad one.

They drove for some miles along a pleasant country road, and then turned into a lane.

"I think we had better go home by Gorsemoor," said Flo; "I know you like that wild bleak open country."

They had emerged from the lane on to the wide hard road which skirted the broad stretch of common land called Gorsemoor, where Flo espied a little group of country people clustered at a spot where two roads crossed, and where there was a little wayside inn.

"You may depend they are waiting for some of the hunting-party," exclaimed Mrs. Lobyer. "Look out, Cecil; do you see any signs of pink in the distance?"

"Yes, I see two or three red coats coming across the common, and a lady."

"A lady? Yes, it *is* a lady! Who can it be? I know no lady about here who hunts. It must be a stranger; shall we stop and indulge our curiosity, Cecil?"

"If you like."

They had reached the cross roads and the little cluster of country people by this time; and Flo's ponies, which had been driven at a good pace by that young lady, were by no means disinclined to draw breath. The country people within a few paces of the carriage looked at the two ladies. One old gaffer touched his hat, and a woman dropped a curtsey; but this was only the ordinary deferential greeting given to unknown "quality." The lady in the pony carriage was not recognised as the mistress of Pevenshall Place. Gorse common was just a little outside the radius within which the influence of Pevenshall reigned supreme.

The red-coats were riding at a leisurely pace, and their horses gave evidence of having done

a good day's work. Flo had not drawn up her ponies three minutes when the huntsmen and the lady reached the cross-roads. There were four huntsmen — two stout middle-aged men, whose tired horses straggled in the rear, and a young man who rode abreast with the lady by his side. It was upon this lady that the little cluster of villagers and the two friends in the pony carriage, as if by common consent, concentrated their attention. She was a very handsome lady—of the red-and-white school; very red and very white—in spite of a little blowsiness incidental to a hard day's hunting; she had a great deal of hair; and if some of the voluminous tresses, which had escaped from a chenille net and had fallen loose upon her shoulders, did not quite correspond in shade, it was the fault of her hair-dresser. She had bold black eyebrows, and a bush of frizzled ringlets plastered very low upon her forehead; so low, indeed, that there was scarcely any thing between the eyebrows and the frizzy hair. Her habit fitted her exquisitely —if possible, just a little too exquisitely—and

there was more braid about it than is compatible with the strictest purism in the ethics of costume. She wore a white chimney-pot hat, with a black veil, and a stand-up collar of the most masculine type, and the stand-up collar was fastened with one very large diamond — a diamond which Florence remembered as the fastening of Mr. Lobyer's collar when he had first attended the Sunday evenings at the Fountains.

The lady was talking very loudly to the gentleman who rode by her side as they passed the pony carriage, and neither the gentleman nor the lady appeared to observe the gray ponies or their owner. This was, perhaps, fortunate, inasmuch as the gentleman was Mr. Lobyer. He was laughing quite heartily at something his companion was saying, and had half turned in his saddle to speak to the two men behind.

"Did you hear her?" he cried triumphantly. "Say what you will, she'll put a topper on it."

In all Cecil's acquaintance with the master of Pevenshall, she had never heard him laugh so heartily, or give any such evidence of high spirits.

She had just time enough to see what manner of person the lady was when the two riders had passed and were gone. The stout men on the tired horses followed. They were two of the Pevenshall visitors who talked "money-market" with Mr. Lobyer, and one of them espied Florence. He lifted his hat, and saluted her as he passed, with abject confusion visible in every line of his countenance. Young ladies who put "toppers" upon conversation may be very agreeable, but a man who devotes himself to their society is apt to expose himself to the chances of rather awkward encounters.

"Doant yon lassie make Tom Lobyer's money spin?" said the gaffer. "Dick Stanner tould me as young Lobyer bought yon mare in York after t' last soommer reaces, and gave close upon fower hundred pound for her. And they say as the bay hoonter she staked at the early part of the winter cost nigh upon as mooch. I think t' ould gentleman would turn in his grave if he could know th' dooks and drakes th' yoong'un is making of his brass."

"Is that lady in the white hat Mrs. Lobyer?" asked a country woman.

"Loard bless ye heart, no, missis—no more than you be. But I'll tell you what she is. She's Mr. Lobyer's master. Dick Stanner, one of the grooms at Howden, he tould me all about her. She lives at Manchester, she does, most of her time. Miss de Raymond, they call her; but she comes over to Chiverley in the hoonting season. She's got a house they call a willer, outside Manchester, and keeps her brougham. Dick Stanner had a friend as lived coachman with her, but he said she was such a wild cat in her tantrums, he wouldn't have stayed in her service for ten pound a-week. She'd been a regular out and outer up in London, Dick says, and had helped to ruin as rich a man as young Lobyer. He picked her up in town, and Dick says he's more afraid of a black look from her than—"

Florence whipped her ponies sharply, and they started off at a pace which startled the little group of country people. She had heard quite enough in those three minutes during which she had

listened almost involuntarily to the gaffer's discourse. Cecil had laid her hand upon her friend's arm entreatingly when the old man mentioned Mr. Lobyer's name, but Flo sat quite still with her eyes fixed on the speaker, and was not to be aroused from the kind of stupor that had seized her at sight of the bold red-and-white-faced woman riding by her husband's side.

They drove some distance on their way homeward before either of the ladies spoke. To Cecil the situation was cruelly painful. Her heart bled for the frivolous girl who had sold herself for wealth and splendour, and of whose future she thought with absolute terror. What was to become of her? So young, so reckless, so much admired; surrounded by every species of temptation, and exposed to neglect and outrage from the husband who should have protected her.

"Perhaps they can be separated on account of this horrible woman," Cecil thought as she pondered the matter during the silent drive. "If Mr. Crawford could only know his son-in-law's conduct, I am sure he would interfere."

And then she determined, whenever a fitting opportunity arose, to implore Flo to intrust her father with the story of her wrongs. In the mean time she looked anxiously at the fair young face half averted from her, and she saw that although Mrs. Lobyer was very pale, her countenance wore a look of quiet resolution scarcely to be expected from so frivolous a person.

"You can understand now, Cecil, how little my flirting with Sir Nugent can matter to Mr. Lobyer," she said, as they passed the gates of Pevenshall, speaking for the first time since she had stopped to listen to the country people's talk.

"Did you know any thing about this before to-day, Flo?"

"I did not know any thing about Miss de Raymond, if that is what you mean; but I have known that my husband does not care about me ever since we came back to England. I daresay Miss de Raymond is a very agreeable person; she seemed to be making them laugh very much. Don't you think her handsome? I do. And I

suppose that white hat with the black veil is the sort of thing you call *chic*."

"Flory, for heaven's sake, don't talk like that."

"How should I talk? I mean to be wise in my generation, and take life lightly. If Mr. Lobyer buys four-hundred-guinea mares for Miss de Raymond, I suppose Sir Nugent Evershed may bring me maiden's-hair from the Howden fernery. I'm afraid you don't understand modern philosophy, Cecil. I do; and I mean to be profoundly philosophical. There is Sir Nugent waiting for us on the terrace. Wasn't it fortunate I insisted on going out without a groom? Though, for the matter of that, I daresay they know all about Miss de Raymond in the servants' hall."

The Baronet came down the steps to assist the ladies in dismounting, while a clanging bell rang in the cupola above the stables, and two eager grooms ran out to receive the vehicle.

"You have been away two hours, Mrs. Lobyer," said Sir Nugent. "Am I to blame you

or Lady Cecil for this disobedience to managerial orders?"

His airy gaiety jarred upon Cecil; but Flo answered him vivaciously in her clear ringing voice, and looked at him with a bright smile, though her face was still colourless.

"How pale you are looking!" he said, with some alarm. "The air has been too cold for you."

"It is rather cold—a dull, damp, penetrating cold," said Flo, with a piteous little shiver; "and now I am going to my own rooms to take a siesta, and I shall forbid any body to come near me."

She glanced at Cecil as she spoke, and ran away, as if she would fain have avoided the possibility of any further discussion. Cecil and Sir Nugent went into the house together.

"All the theatrical party are possessed by a kind of fever this afternoon," said the Baronet. "My cousin Grace has been walking up and down the terrace muttering to herself like a sibyl, and George Miniver has been pacing the picture-gallery in a dramatic frenzy. How little

this evening's visitors will appreciate the agonies we have undergone for their amusement! As for me, I feel a kind of despairing resignation to the ordeal that awaits me, such as one can fancy a man may feel the night before his execution. I have been playing billiards all the afternoon with some officers from Chiverley, in order to get rid of the time."

"Some officers from Chiverley." The phrase set Cecil's heart beating at an abnormal pace. The only officers now at Chiverley were the Plungers. And yet Lady Cecil O'Boyneville had no right to be affected by any intelligence relating to the Plungers. She thought of poor Flo's miserable circumstances, and remembered how much happier her own life was, even in Bloomsbury. It may be a hard thing to have a husband who gives his best thoughts to the interests of a soap-boiling company; but it is infinitely harder to have a husband who devotes his leisure to the society of a Miss de Raymond.

Cecil went to her own pretty sitting-room, where the candles were lighted and the fire

burning brightly. She took a book, and tried to read until it was time to dress for dinner; but the thought of Flo's and her own domestic circumstances came between her and the page. She was glad when the little clock on the chimney-piece struck half-past six, and there was some excuse for beginning her toilette for the eight-o'clock dinner. It was about half-past seven when she went downstairs, dressed for the evening, and looking very elegant and very girlish in a fresh toilette of white tulle, with wreath and bouquets of snowdrops—a costume which had been ordered from a French milliner for this especial evening, in accordance with a suggestion of Mrs. Lobyer's.

The great drawing-room was blazing with light, and bright with assembled guests, when Cecil entered it—so bright that its first effect was eminently bewildering, and the new-comer was glad to gain the sanctuary of a triangular ottoman on which Clara Evershed and the sentimental widow were talking scandal under a pyramid of exotics.

"We have been amusing ourselves by the study of Mr. Lobyer's friends," said Miss Evershed. "What delightful people they are, and what a privilege it is to meet them! They have begun to talk about American finance and the drain of gold already. However, we are not entirely given over to Manchester. The military element is strong among us. There are three or four of the Plungers, and amongst them that Major Gordon who distinguished himself at Burradalchoodah."

The room, bright and confused before, span round before Cecil's eyes for a moment, a chaos of light and splendour.

"Is Major Gordon here?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you know him? He is over there by the fireplace, talking to Nugent and Mr. Lobyer. Don't you think him very handsome? I do; much handsomer than Nugent; grander and more distinguished; not such a dash of *petit-maître* about him; but then no civilian is ever quite equal to a high-bred military man. I suppose the girls here will allow poor Nugent a *relâche*, and

devote their attention to the Major, who is a widower, and enormously rich, I am told."

"Yes," Cecil answered quietly; "he is very rich. He is my aunt's nephew, and a kind of distant connection of my own, I suppose."

Miss Evershed's volubility had given Cecil time to recover her composure, and to read herself one of those little lectures with which she had been accustomed of late to school herself. What reason had she to be agitated? What was it to her that chance had brought Hector Gordon to Pevenshall? Could there be any one in the room more utterly a stranger to her than he must be for evermore? She remembered this, and tried to think of her absent husband brooding over the details of Snooks *versus* Tomkins by his lonely hearth, while she affected to listen to Miss Evershed's vivacious chatter.

Across the crowd she saw the proud head that had bent over her on the misty sands. They were strangers—such utter strangers now and for evermore; but even in that lighted room, amidst the odour of exotics, the buzz and hum of

many voices, the breath of the ocean came back to her, and like a rushing wind from that unforgotten sea returned the memory of the past, with all its sorrow and passion, its silent anguish and despair.

CHAPTER II.

"HOW SHOULD I GREET THEE?"

THE German diplomatist took Cecil in to dinner, and she found herself seated a very long way from Major Gordon, who was quite hidden from her by a barrier of hothouse flowers, crystallised fruits, and oxydised silver candelabra. There was a little interval in the drawing-room after the long elaborate banquet, during which Flo and the rest of the amateur performers disappeared from the horizon. There were constant arrivals of people who came from short distances to assist at the private theatricals, and the room filled rapidly in this interregnum. And in all the time Major Gordon and Cecil O'Boyneville happened to be at different ends of the long room, almost as far apart as they had been with the Overland journey between them, Cecil thought, as she caught

glimpses of the familiar figure now and then at the end of a long vista.

There was rather a longer interval than had been anticipated, and Mr. Lobyer, lounging in his favourite attitude against one of the mantle-pieces, looked at his watch more than once with a disagreeable sneer upon his face.

"Half-past ten," he said, "and these amateurs were to have begun at ten. I suppose Evershed has lost his boots—or his memory—at the last moment; or my wife has set fire to her wig, or the machinery of the curtains is found to be unmanageable, or there is something agreeable of that kind in the wind. I never knew people make fools of themselves in this way that they didn't come to grief in some manner."

But Mr. Lobyer's forebodings were not realised. The door was flung open presently, and a solemn butler announced that the performance was about to commence; whereupon there was considerable rejoicing and some little bustle.

The German diplomatist again presented himself to Cecil, and, escorted by that gentleman, she

made her way to the billiard-room, where, in the confusion attendant on the placing of some fifty or sixty people, she had little time to notice who occupied the seat next her. It was only when the rustling of silk and fluttering of tulle, the whispering and exclaiming, the questioning and answering, and entreating and refusing, and all the polite squabbling was over and every one fairly settled, that Cecil glanced towards the person on her right hand. Her heart had been beating at an abnormal pace all the evening; but perhaps it beat a little faster when she perceived that her right-hand neighbour was Major Gordon.

They were to be seated side by side during the performance of a five-act comedy—for two hours at least—so near that when he moved his arm in unfolding his perfumed programme he stirred the airy puffings of her dress. As yet he was—or appeared to be—unconscious of her presence, and was listening deferentially to Miss Evershed's animated discourse; for though that young lady was apt to express herself very strongly in reprobation of the husband-hunting

propensities of other girls, she was renowned as one of the most desperate flirts in the county.

Cecil found herself wondering that Hector Gordon should be there, listening to the foolish talk of a lighthearted coquette, when it was only nine or ten months since the current of his life had been overshadowed by sorrow and death. His manner was graver and more subdued than of old, it is true; but still he was there, amidst that scene of foolish gaiety, while his young wife's grave was not yet a year old.

The band-master waved his baton while Cecil was thinking this, and the band began the overture to the *Bronze Horse*. It was in the midst of this lively music that Hector Gordon turned and met the eyes of the woman he had once asked to be his wife. They saluted each other as ceremoniously as if they faintly remembered having met once before at a ball, or a morning concert, or somewhere. Cecil had been paler than usual from the early part of that evening, and on first seeing the Scotchman she had observed that the old warm glow of colour had vanished from his

bearded face. If she fancied for a moment that he grew paler as he looked at her, it was only a foolish fancy, which she dismissed in the next instant.

"How do you do, Lady Cecil O'Boyneville?" he said, with just the faintest emphasis on the surname.

"How do you do, Major Gordon?"

Cecil would have been terribly perplexed had she been called upon to say any thing more; but amidst the brazen prancings of the *Bronze Horse* this was about as much as could be said.

The band-master flourished his baton in a kind of frenzy as he urged his men to the climax; the cornets and trombones blew themselves into convulsions, and with a brilliant volley of chords, short and sharp as file-firing, the crimson-velvet curtains swept apart, revealing a bijou chamber which Vestris herself might have envied.

It was a boudoir hung with white satin, and furnished with chairs and sofas and tiny fragile tables of white wood, that were miracles of the upholsterer's art. On tables and cabinets there

were vases of Sèvres biscuit filled with white exotics. Every thing in the gemlike chamber was white. It was the virginal nest of a Parisian *aristocrate* of the old *régime;* such a nest as one might find nowadays in the *Champs Elysées* or the *Rue Taibout*, occupied by a different tenant. The comedy was called *On accorde à qui persévère*, and was one of those airy fabrics which can only be constructed by the light hand of a Gallic workman.

The Comtesse de Presles is lovely, rich, aristocratic, a widow, and two-and-twenty. For her the universe is the sunniest and most delightful affair. She revels in her beauty, her wealth, her youth, her freedom: but so many charms are accompanied with certain penalties. The Countess is persecuted by the crowd of her adorers; and at last, in order to escape their importunities, in very despair she accepts the addresses of the Duc d'Auberive, a gentleman of forty years, *bien sonnées*, stiff, grand, all that there is of the most patrician —a man whose ancestors have made their own terms with the kings of France—a man whose great-grandfather's arrogance would have defied

the throne, had it not been strangled by the iron hand of a Richelieu.

Affianced to this gentleman, whom she respects but does not love, Léonie de Presles is tranquil. Her lovers can no longer molest her. The name of the Duc d'Auberive will serve as an ægis, before which the most presumptuous of these *soupirants* must retire abashed.

No, not the most presumptuous. There is the Marquis, the most utter scapegrace amongst them all. The man whose case was of all others most hopeless—*le dernier des derniers;* the rejected of the rejected; poor, out-at-elbows — morally, not actually, for he makes his creditors dress him handsomely in spite of themselves — dissipated, reckless; a man who has squandered an enormous fortune at *lansquenet*, and has lampooned the Pompadour; a man who at any moment may be consigned to the darkest underground cell in the Bastille, to finish his worthless life in the society of rats and spiders. And this man dares to pursue the lovely Countess with his insolent importunities. He dares even more. He tells her that she

shall marry him. Yes; though he is poor and worthless and a scapegrace—though he has lost all his money at *lansquenet*—though she has affianced herself to that respectable idiot the Duke. He loves her. Is not that enough? As to the fortune he has lost—a bagatelle! For her sake he will win another fortune. As for the fury of the Pompadour—he defies the Pompadour. For Léonie's sake he will do any thing that is desperate—save the King's life when it has not been in peril; discover the details of a great political plot that has never existed; do something to win the favour of the monarch himself, in spite of the Pompadour.

It is in vain that the Countess would banish this insolent. She denies him her door—he comes in at the window. She gives her servants the most severe orders — instant dismissal for the renegade who admits the Marquis. But in spite of her the rejected wretch is perpetually at her feet. She triumphs in the thought of having outwitted him, and the next moment he is there—by her side. She sends for her milliner, and lo, her milliner is the Marquis. She orders a cup of

chocolate, and the lacquey who brings it is the Marquis. She summons one of her gardeners to complain of the poverty of her exotics, and the gardener is transformed into the Marquis.

And in all this there are involved those exquisite complications, that delicious *équivoque* of which Scribe was so great a master. Every moment there is some fresh situation, some new and delightful perplexity. Now the Marquis is hiding behind a screen—now dipping his powdered head up and down behind an ottoman. The Duke is always being fooled more or less, and the Countess is forced into deceptions she abhors by the artifices of her impertinent suitor. And with the fabulous good luck of all these fascinating scapegraces of the Parisian drama, the Marquis triumphs over every difficulty. All that he has promised to do in jest, he is able to achieve in earnest: without effort, for the trump-cards of fortune drop into his hands. He *does* save the King's life, in a hunting-party, almost by accident. He *does* discover a real political conspiracy, and again almost by accident. The King is delighted with him, the Pom-

padour forgives him, the forfeited lands of an ancestor are restored to him. A Jew miser who has begged of him, and whom he has assisted, dies and leaves him millions. And at last, tormented beyond all measure, the Countess yields; the Duke retires, glad to be out of a contest which is altogether unfamiliar to his stateliness, and the Marquis triumphs.

Such a piece as this seems written to be acted in a drawing-room. There is no declamation, there are no heroics. Nothing is wanted but coquettish grace in the women, ease and assurance in the men. And who can imagine any thing more delightful than Florence Lobyer in the *rôle* of the persecuted Countess? Such bewitching insolence of the grande dame; such fascinating hauteur; such delicious grace in refusing; such lovely tenderness in the moment of relenting. And the Pompadour dress—that most perfect of all fashions ever invented to render loveliness irresistible—that costume in which plebeian beauty loses its alloy of vulgar clay, and is sublimated into the ideal—that bewildering and bewitching attire which

imparts to the snub-nose of a Dubarry a grace unsurpassed by the classic profile of a Phryne—what of Florence Lobyer in blue brocade and old point, powder and diamonds, patches and hoop, high-heeled shoes with glittering buckles and gold-embroidered stockings? If Mr. Lobyer had chosen his wife because she was the best thing to be had in the way of wives, he had good reason to be proud of her to-night, when she flashed her beauty and her diamonds upon the dazzled eyes of his guests.

He was proud of her—after his own sullen fashion—and angry with her too; for another man shared the applause which she won, and made himself the central feature in the night's triumph. It was not of Mr. Lobyer's wealth, or the glories of Pevenshall—the oxydised silver candelabra and epergnes—the looking-glass plateau, with its border of silver bulrushes and silver stags drinking in the placid stream; it was not of the splendour of Mr. Lobyer's dinner-table, or the cost of Mr. Lobyer's modern pictures, that these people would talk when they went home. The event of the evening was the amateur acting,

which the master of Pevenshall stigmatised as tomfoolery; and the triumphs of the evening belonged to Florence and Sir Nugent.

Lolling in his luxurious chair, and staring at the brilliant little stage with a moody countenance, Mr. Lobyer reflected upon many things, the thought of which was scarcely adapted to the scene in which he found himself. "Ah, if at some delightful assembly, where every one is looking so pleased and happy, one could take the roofs off people's brains, as Asmodeus lifted the tiles and timbers of Madrid, what strange subjects we should find our friends pondering! There would be Smith thinking of that iniquitous lawsuit, in which the villany of some pettifogging attorney has involved him; Brown calculating the amounts of renewed accommodation-bills, which must so soon be renewed again; Mrs. Jones thinking what a brute Jones has been for the last week, and how shamefully he is flirting with that brazen-faced Mrs. Smith; Thomson brooding over the gloom of the Stock Exchange, and the amount of capital he has squandered on "contango."

And yet "the dalliance and the wit" go on all the while. Mrs. Brown sings one of her pretty sentimental songs—"Robin Adair," or "John Anderson my Jo"—while her feelings towards Brown are almost murderous; Smith warbles his little French *chanson*—all about *laissons rire-er*, and *un beau sourire-er*—and is thinking of what he should like to do to the lawyer even as he warbles. O sublime hypocrisies of social intercourse! Is saddle-of-mutton, very often cold; salmon, whose attendant cucumber comes too late; ice-pudding, dissolving languidly on the napkin that envelopes it; are the cates and confections of a modern dinner worth so much deception? Instead of the stereotyped invitation prepared by a fashionable stationer, why do not our friends write to us, saying, "Come, let us weep and howl together; for sorrows are many, and life is bitter"?

Leaning back in his chair, and looking at the stage, where the Marquis in violet velvet and gold was coquetting with the Countess in blue brocade and diamonds, Thomas Lobyer's thoughts went back to an unforgotten time, and he saw a grassy

angle, shut in by ivy-covered walls, and heard the clamorous voices of a crowd of boys. He felt a shower of blows sent home by a practised arm, the hot breath of an antagonist upon his cheek, a handsome face pressing closer and closer to his own. He felt all this; and the vengeful fury of that moment came back to him, intensified by certain feelings that had influenced him of late.

"He makes himself at home in my house," thought the millionaire. "*He* gives his orders to the upholsterers, I'll warrant, though they'll send their bills to me. *He* chooses the piece that is to be played; *he* secures the services of the band. And I know that he hates me, and he knows that I hate him; and yet we smirk and grin at each other, like a couple of clowns at a fair. If that knife had struck nearer home, and had done for him altogether, it couldn't have been much worse for me than it was. I daresay I should only have had a twelvemonth's imprisonment or so, and I shouldn't have had him turning up on my wedding tour, and taking possession of my house."

The comedy came to an end at last. It had seemed *very* long to Cecil. The German diplomatist had talked to her between the acts, and Major Gordon had talked to Miss Evershed.

After the comedy there was an adjournment to the dining-room, for a stand-up supper,—one of those suppers which admit of such ravages in stealthy middle-aged devourers, who prowl from table to table and from sideboard to buffet, sipping of one sweet and then flying to the rest; consuming unknown quantities of white soup, and lobster-salad; taking now a seven-and-six-penny peach, now a plate of plovers' eggs embedded in savoury jelly; pausing here to quaff sparkling hock, and lingering there to imbibe dry champagne. Such a supper-room affords a superb platform for flirtation; and the young ladies staying in the house, and the young lady-visitors of the evening, did considerable execution amongst the Plungers, recently returned from the pale beauties of Hindostan, and ready to fall victims to the rosy brightness of fresh young British belles.

Cecil saw that Hector Gordon was graver and more subdued than his brother officers; but she saw also that he talked to Miss Evershed very much as he had talked to herself in the first days of their acquaintance at Fortinbras, and that he was undisturbed by any memory of the past. She felt that she had reason to be very glad of this. Any apparent consciousness of that brief romance by the sea-shore on his part must have been unspeakably painful to her now; and yet—and yet—she felt, at the same time, that Hector Gordon's calm indifference did not give her so much pleasure as it should have done.

The close of the evening was very brilliant. The band of the Plungers adjourned to the great conservatory opening out of the drawing-room, after having supped luxuriously — so luxuriously indeed, that one of the cornet-players bungled considerably in the process of changing his keys, and was severely reprimanded by his chief. But the Pevenshall guests were too deep in flirtation and pleasure to be aware of any transient hitch in

the harmony of that delicious Plunger band, which played waltzes and galops to perfection; and the effect of the red coats and glittering brazen instruments seen athwart the dusky foliage of palm and orange, citron and cactus, was picturesque in the extreme. Foremost among the waltzers were Florence in her Pompadour dress, and Sir Nugent in his violet-velvet coat and diamond-hilted rapier; and the German diplomatist watching them observed to Cecil that it was evident the baronet had learned to waltz upon the other side of the Alps. Conspicuous on account of her position as mistress of the house, doubly conspicuous because of her beauty and brilliant costume, Mrs. Lobyer could not indulge in the mildest flirtation without incurring a certain degree of observation; and her flirtation with Sir Nugent to-night was not of the mildest order. It seemed as if he could not quite put off his character of the scapegrace adorer while he still wore the dress. As he had pursued the lovely countess in the comedy, so he pursued the bewitching Mrs. Lobyer now that the comedy was over.

As Flo had coquetted in her *rôle* of the countess, so she coquetted now.

Fast young squires remarked to their intimates that the pretty little woman was "going the pace." Dowagers regarded Mrs. Lobyer curiously through double eye-glasses. Even Miss Evershed shrugged her shoulders, and told her confidante of the moment that the flirtation was really becoming a little too glaring.

"I shall speak to Nugent about it to-morrow," she said; "for I think he minds me as much as he does any one; and as I know she is a good little thing, with no real harm in her, I don't like to see her make a fool of herself."

It was nearly four o'clock when the last carriage rolled away from beneath the Italian portico. It was quite four o'clock when Florence went upstairs with Cecil.

> "Now half to the setting moon are gone,
> And half to the rising day:
> Low on the sand, and loud on the stone,
> The last wheel echoes away,"

exclaimed Mrs. Lobyer, whose gaiety throughout the evening had been of a very feverish order.

"Let me come to your room, Cecil. We'll have some strong tea, and talk over our evening. Do you think it has been successful?"

The two ladies were on the threshold of Cecil's room as Florence asked this question. They went into the luxurious little retreat, where the fire and candles were always burning as brightly as if they had been watched by some genius of comfort rather than by an ordinary attendant. Mrs. Lobyer rang for tea; and then, after flinging herself into one of the low chairs, pulled off her powdered wig with its superstructure of plumes and diamonds.

"O, how my head aches!" she exclaimed as she loosened her hair and let it fall in a shower upon her shoulders. "I wonder whether real actresses ever feel as I have felt to-night. Do you know that I had a splitting headache before dinner, and that my brain has been throbbing like a steam-engine all the evening. Just put your hand upon my head."

Cecil laid her fingers gently upon the fair young head, which was burning with fever. She

brought eau-de-cologne from the adjoining room, and bathed her friend's forehead. Mrs. Lobyer's maid appeared while Cecil was doing this.

"Let us have some strong green-tea, Martin," said Flo; "and bring me a dressing-gown. I want to get rid of this horrible dress."

The maid retired to give her order, and returned almost immediately with a loose garment of white cashmere and quilted satin. She took to pieces the brilliant Pompadour toilette, the diamonds and lace and bouquets and plumes, and removed the useless litter, leaving her mistress wrapped in the dressing-gown, with her fair hair falling about her face and neck.

She lay back in her luxurious chair in a listless attitude, looking dreamily at the fire, and did not speak until some little time after the tea-service had been brought.

"You are sure that you are not sleepy, Cecil, and that I am not making myself a nuisance?" she said at last.

"Quite sure, dear. Shall I pour you out some tea?"

"If you please: only it isn't fair that you should wait upon me."

"You have so much more reason to be tired than I have."

"But I am not in the least tired," exclaimed Flo; "I am only preternaturally awake. And now tell me, Cecil, do you think my evening has been a success?"

"I think people enjoyed themselves extremely."

"That is no answer, Cecil."

"And I think you acted charmingly; indeed, every one thought so; but—"

"Ah, there it is! I expected the 'but.' What is it, Cecil?"

"Am I to be candid, Flory? You know I love you very sincerely, dear; and I want our friendship to be something more than the conventional friendliness of women who praise each other's dresses and bonnets. Am I to speak without reserve?"

"O yes, if you please," answered Flo, with a sigh of resignation. "I have been doing something dreadful, I suppose?"

"I think you know what I am going to say as well as I do, Florence."

"Perhaps I do; but you shall say it notwithstanding. What is it?"

"You remember what we talked of this afternoon. I told you that I thought your manner with Sir Nugent Evershed was a little different from your manner with other people, and apt to invite observation on that account. I tell you frankly, Florence, that your manner and his manner to-night *did* attract observation, and that some of your guests spoke of you as they had no right to speak. People are very incautious in a crowded room, and one hears things that are not intended to be heard."

To Cecil's surprise her friend burst into a laugh — a clear silvery peal of laughter, which would have been charming if it had not been in such strange discord with the occasion.

"And so people have begun to talk of me?" she said. "I daresay they have talked enough of Mr. Lobyer and Miss de Raymond; and now I suppose they will talk of me and Sir Nugent Evershed."

"Florence, for heaven's sake don't talk like that!"

"How would you have me talk? Am I to submit tamely to my wrongs? If my husband outrages me, I will outrage him. Why, those ignorant country people could give me the clue to Mr. Lobyer's indifference. They know that my husband devotes his life to another woman—and has only married me because he wants some one to sit at the head of his table who does not smoke or swear or paint herself red and white, like Miss de Raymond. He likes the smoking and the swearing and the red-and-white paint, you know; and I have no doubt he thinks me a horribly insipid creature; but society is not yet so advanced that he can afford to place a Miss de Raymond at the head of his table. That will come in due course."

"Florence, you must not speak of things in this way. I know, dear, that your position is a most painful one, and I can only think of one thing that you can do to lessen its misery."

"And what is that?"

"Write to your father, telling him every

thing, or beg him to come to you. He is the only person you can safely trust with the secret you have so unhappily discovered."

"Secret!" cried Flo, bitterly; "a secret that is known to all the country side. No, Cecil; your advice is very good, I daresay; but it is advice that I can never act upon. I have made a mistake, but I made it with my eyes open; and I will never tell my father how miserably my folly has come home to me. He gave his consent to my marriage with such reluctance; he knew that I was selling myself for fine clothes and a splendid establishment. But I tried to deceive him—I tried to deceive myself. Modern London is a kind of Maelstrom, Cecil, and my poor foolish head was giddy with all that confusion of carriages and horses, and bric-à-brac and jewelry. Every body is so rich now-a-days, and one is stifled with the wealth of other people. I had begun to think that life was intolerable without a million of money, some time before I met Mr. Lobyer. He was the first millionaire who crossed my path, and I accepted him blindly. But I

thought that he asked me to be his wife because he loved me, Cecil—honestly, after his own unromantic fashion—and I meant to do my duty to him; I did indeed, Cecil."

"I believe it, darling; and you may still do your duty," answered Cecil, bending tenderly over the slight figure. Mrs. Lobyer had slipped from the low chair to the ground, and was half-sitting half-kneeling at her friend's feet.

"What, with a Miss de Raymond in the background! Never, Cecil! Besides, I had long given over that idea of doing my duty. Within a week of my marriage I discovered how mistaken I had been in thinking Mr. Lobyer cared for *me*. It was for his own glorification, the gratification of his own vanity, that he married me; and I am not so much to him as his horses or his dogs, for he takes some pleasure in their society. He swore at me before our honeymoon was over, because I ventured to remonstrate with him for his brutality to a waiter who had made some mistake about the arrangements of the dinner. From that time all thought of doing my duty honestly and conscien-

tiously, as I had meant to do it, was over. Our marriage was reduced to the level of a bargain, and I resolved to perform my part of the bargain as fairly as I could. So I dress to the best of my ability, and I receive my husband's friends, and am civil even to those Manchester people, and I fill up invitation-cards, and give the housekeeper her orders, and discuss the arrangements of the house—who is to have the blue-room, and who is to have the chintz-room, and who we may venture to put upon the second-floor, and so on. With regard to Sir Nugent Evershed, I will frankly confess that he is an unutterable relief to me after Manchester; and if I flirt with him a little now and then, I consider myself quite at liberty to do so. To-night my nerves were irritated by the rencontre of the afternoon, and I daresay I behaved very foolishly. I wanted to demonstrate my defiance of my husband. I wished to show these people—who, no doubt, know all about Miss de Raymond—I wished them to see that I was no sentimental wife devoted to an unfaithful husband."

"But, my dearest Florence, was it wise to sacrifice your own self-respect in order to gratify your pride?"

"I have no self-respect. I have never respected myself since I married Mr. Lobyer. O Cecil, there is nothing that has ever been written about such marriages too strong or too bitter for their iniquity. We sell ourselves like slaves, and when the bargain is completed, we hate the master who has bought us. Don't kiss me, Cecil. I am not worthy that any good woman's lips should touch mine. I have sold myself to a man whom I despised before I hated him; and now that it is too late I repent of my wickedness."

"But if Mr. Lobyer outrages you by association with such a woman as that person we saw to-day, you may be released from this unhappy union. You have only to appeal to your father, Florence; surely he can help you."

"Yes, he can take me back to the Fountains, to be the laughing-stock of every body who ever knew me before my marriage. Ah,

how the manœuvering mothers and husband-hunting daughters would triumph if they could discover that my brilliant match had ended in failure and misery! No, Cecil, I must abide by the bargain I have made for myself; and, after all, I cannot complain that I am cheated. I sold myself for diamonds, and carriages, and horses, and servants; and Mr. Lobyer has given them to me. I told you it would be a bad thing for me when I came to talk seriously of things. I must take life lightly, Cecil, like other women who marry for money. And now *parlons toilette;* tell me how you liked my dress to-night. *Is* that blue a good candle-light colour? I had awful doubts on the subject. If there were any green tinges in it, I must have looked hideous."

After this Cecil tried in vain to bring her friend back to any thing like serious conversation. Mrs. Lobyer chattered as gaily as if no sorrow had ever shadowed her life, and the dim winter daylight glimmered coldly behind the rose-tinted curtains before Cecil could induce her to retire. They separated at last, however, after kissing each

other affectionately: and Florence Lobyer's grand field-night came to a close.

After the amateur theatricals, there was a little lull at Pevenshall. Mrs. Lobyer kept her room for a day or two, attended constantly by Lady Cecil O'Boyneville. Medical wisdom pronounced that she had over-fatigued herself, and ordered extreme quiet. But to endure such a regimen as the doctor prescribed for more than eight-and-forty hours was quite beyond Florence's patience. On the evening of the second day she reappeared in the drawing-room, paler than usual, and all the more fascinating by reason of that delicate pallor.

Pevenshall was besieged by callers during that particular week—people who had been so delighted, and so charmed, and so surprised by the amateur comedy, and who were eager to testify their gratification and their delight to the mistress of the mansion. Amongst these callers were the officers of the Plungers, and amongst the officers came Major Gordon.

He came one bright frosty morning, when a bevy of ladies, headed by Miss Evershed, had sailed off to the billiard-room, and when the group in the drawing-room was a very small one. The sentimental widow sat by the fire reading a new French novel—the philosophy of which she took the trouble to expound now and then for the benefit of her companions; an elderly dowager dosed over the morning paper; Mrs. Lobyer sat at a little table by one of the windows, trifling with her brushes, before a half-finished water-colour sketch of a group of camellia japonicas that had been brought from the conservatory for the gratification of a sudden artistic impulse on the part of the mistress of Pevenshall; and Cecil bent over an elaborately embroidered slipper which she was preparing for the great O'Boyneville.

"I think it would be rather nice if I could only get a bird's-nest," said Flo after a lengthened contemplation of her sketch; "'Camellia Japonicas and a Bird's-nest—Mrs. Lobyer.' That would look very well in a catalogue, wouldn't it? But I suppose birds'-nests are out of season in

January. People talk about money being able to buy any thing, and yet I daresay my picture will be a failure for want of a bird's-nest. Camellia japonicas by themselves are so uninteresting; and I did so want to astonish papa by sending something to the British Institution, just to show him that I hadn't neglected my painting. What do you think of a cut lemon, Cecil? one of those big clumsy lemons one sees in old pictures, with the rind trailing from it. Or what would you say to a silver salver, or one of Mr. Lobyer's great chased tankards, or a Sèvres vase? I positively must have something to relieve the insipidity of my camellia japonicas."

While Mrs. Lobyer was debating this important subject, Major Gordon was announced. Cecil and Florence were seated very near each other; and after shaking hands with both ladies, the soldier took the chair nearest his hostess.

Then for the first time Cecil felt the extreme embarrassment of her position. The man who had once loved her approached her as a stranger, and yet, in spite of her prayers—in spite of her

struggles to hold firmly to the right, the vision of the past came back to her; and she thought of him, not as she saw him now, courteously indifferent, conventionally polite—but as she had seen him on that last day at Fortinbras, with his head bent, and his eyes dim with tears.

But with him it was otherwise, thought Cecil. Surely if any recollection of that time had been present to his mind, he could not have seemed so entirely at his ease. He inquired about his aunt. He had not seen her since his return to England, and he was very anxious to see her, dear soul, he said. She was visiting, of course, always visiting at this time of year. He had received delightful letters from her, and invitations to some of the houses at which she was staying.

"If I can get away from Chiverley for a week, I shall run over to Thornley Grange, in Leicestershire, where she is to be in March," he said; "but at the worst I shall see her in town I suppose early in the spring."

This last remark seemed to require an answer, so Cecil replied that she had no doubt Mrs. Mac-

Claverhouse would return to Dorset Square in the spring.

And after this the conversation became general. Florence told Major Gordon her difficulties with regard to the camellia japonicas.

"They will come out so stiffly," she said despondingly: "no one but a Miss Mutrie or a Van Huysum could make any thing out of them."

Mr. Lobyer came in from a morning's ride while the Scotchman was talking to the two ladies, and on this particular occasion Mr. Lobyer happened to be in very good humour with himself and the world in general. The Chili Island loan, in which he was vitally interested, was beginning to look up in the market, after having been for some time in bad odour; and the influence of a rapid advance of seven-eighths brightened the millionaire's countenance. He made himself as agreeable as it was in him to be, and invited the Major to dinner the next day, when some "other fellows" were coming from Manchester.

The Major hesitated just a little before he accepted the invitation, and it seemed to Mrs. Lob-

yer that he glanced towards Cecil in that moment of hesitation; but he did accept it.

"Why, Cecil, you never told me that Major Gordon was related to you," said Flo when that gentleman had departed.

"He is not related to me. My aunt, Mrs. MacClaverhouse, is only his aunt-in-law; there is no real relationship even between Major Gordon and her; there is no relationship whatever between him and me."

"Indeed! But you did not even tell me that you knew him. How very nice he is—and a young widower! I think there is nothing so interesting as a young widower. One generally associates a widower with baldness, and stoutness, and half-a-dozen children in rusty mourning: but a young widower is delightful: and he is, or is to be, very rich, is he not? Mr. Lobyer says so, and he keeps a kind of mental register of other people's banking accounts. I wish there were no such person as Mr. O'Boyneville."

"Florence!"

"O, I don't mean any unkindness towards

him. But if you were only single, it would be so nice to make a match between you and the Major. Match-making is the natural occupation of a married woman, and I want an eligible couple to operate upon. Depend upon it, Mrs. Vancourt will set her cap at our Major."

This was said *sotto voce*, for Mrs. Vancourt was the sentimental widow.

The lady in question looked up from her book five minutes afterwards to expatiate upon a passage thereof.

"Is not this true?" she said. "How well this man knows the human heart! 'Il n'y a jamais d'oubli où il y a eu de l'amour. Durant l'absence on croit toujours oublier, et on se trompe toujours. Mais lorsqu'on revoit celle qu'on a aimée, les années passées s'envolent comme le songe d'une nuit d'été, et on s'aperçoit qu'on n'a jamais cessé d'aimer.'"

A faint blush spread itself over Cecil O'Boyneville's face as the widow finished her lecture; for there seemed to her some grain of truth amidst the French romancer's flimsy sentimentality.

CHAPTER III.

BETWEEN CARTHAGE AND KENSINGTON.

WHILE the splendours and gaieties of Mr. Lobyer's household afforded conversation for the neighbourhood of Pevenshall, William Crawford the painter worked his hardest at a picture which he fondly hoped would be one of his best achievements. It was for this that he had declined his daughter's invitations,—for this, and perhaps just a little because the society of Mr. Lobyer was distasteful to him, and the gorgeousness of the Lobyer *ménage* stifling and oppressive.

He had refreshed himself with a month's holiday during the past autumn, and had spent his holiday in Venice, the city of his love,—the city to which he had taken flight after his first success, —to rest for a while amid the dreamy beauty of the Adriatic, the poetic glories of the past.

After his holiday he had returned to the Fountains with a sketch for his new picture in his portfolio—a sketch that had been thought out and dreamed over as he lay back in his gondola, or basked, at full length, in some woody island, with pine-trees murmuring above his head, and blue and emerald-tinted wavelets creeping to his feet.

The union between the painter and his only child had never been a very close one; and although pretty frivolous, Florence was very dear to his heart. Her marriage had not made any great break in his life. He looked forward to seeing her early in the spring, when a Tyburnian mansion which Mr. Lobyer had hired at a rental of something between five and six hundred per annum, was to be furnished and fitted for the reception of its occupants; and in the mean time he was very happy alone in his painting-room, with the grand old cedars making a solemn shade in his garden, and his big canvas on the monster easel under the north-west light.

He was very happy, with ample leisure for his art; and, alas for the weakness of earth's grandest

spirit! there was one other passion besides his worship of art which absorbed the painter's mind in these quiet January days.

Mrs. Champernowne had returned to the Hermitage before Christmas, and had been pleased to write a little note of inquiry about Mr. Crawford's labours, and had been pleased to welcome him graciously when he called in response to her note, and to bestow her sweetest smiles upon him whenever he chose to visit her.

His visits to the Hermitage had been very frequent of late, and it seemed as if the fascinating Georgina could not see him too often. She talked of his art and of his own special triumphs that had been and were yet to be, with as much appearance of interest as if she had been his sister or his wife; for sisters are not always given to enthusiasm upon the subject of a brother's successes. She made him strong tea; she played Mozart to him; she ordered her niece to sing pretty little ballads for his pleasure; she spent a small fortune in the purchase of French and German photographs in order to have something new to show him whenever he came to

the Hermitage; but in the presence of other people she always carefully avoided any thing like *empressement* in her manner to the great painter.

"She is very cautious," he thought bitterly. "It amuses her to indulge me as she indulges her cats; but if I were to tell her that I adore her, and that she has rendered my life a burden to me without her, she would elevate her eyebrows with the most innocent air of surprise, and demand what justification she had given me for my presumption."

But in spite of this conviction, the painter was a constant visitor in that tranquil abode, where there was always a faint odour of hyacinth and myosotis, and a delicious atmosphere of repose not to be found elsewhere. Ah, if the lively matrons, the brilliant rattles, only knew the profound charm which a wise man finds in the companionship of a quiet woman! Mr. Crawford dined sometimes with the widow, who altered her old-fashioned hours and took her dinner at seven to serve his convenience. The little dining-room at the Hermitage was very delightful to the painter, with its sombre colouring of gray and green, its few per-

fect bronzes, and three or four rare pictures, and instead of the glare of gas, the subdued light of half-a-dozen yellow wax-candles in antique silver candlesticks. The widow's dinners were perfection on a small scale; her wines were of the rarest and best; and above and beyond all this, she possessed the talent of bringing together people who suited one another.

William Crawford abandoned himself entirely to the dangerous delights of this acquaintance. The cup which the siren's hand offered his thirsty lips contained a beverage which he knew to be poisonous; but he drank nevertheless, and grasped the fatal chalice with a feverish eagerness.

He was in love—as entirely engulfed in the terrible ocean as the most ignorant plunger who ever leapt blindly to his doom in the stormy waves. He had allowed himself to drift imperceptibly down the stream; and it was only when the current had grown too strong for him that he discovered whither the cruel tide was hurrying him. And when the discovery came it was too late—too late to recede—too late to be wise.

"At the worst she can only break my heart," thought the painter. And having a good deal of the *laissez-aller* in his composition, he gave himself up to the delights of the Hermitage, and shut his eyes upon the darksome vision of the future.

He worked hard; but not so indefatigably as he would have worked if there had been no such person as Mrs. Champernowne in existence; not as he had worked in the Buckingham-Street lodging in the days of his obscurity. The real artist should care for nothing but his art. This is the doctrine which William Crawford had preached and practised for fifteen years of his life; but in these latter days he was false to his own teaching, and tried to serve two masters. The great canvas on his easel progressed slowly, and he began to look at it hopelessly as he thought how soon the fitful sunshines of April would steal upon him.

"A year sooner or later can make little difference to me," he thought, "and yet I should like to have made my mark in the Academy this season. There are new men springing up, and—and I want the critics to see that my colour has not

lost all its brilliancy since the days of the Aspasia."

Throughout the progress of his picture Mrs. Champernowne was his sympathising and encouraging friend. She entered heart and soul into every subject connected with his work—all his ambitious hopes—his depressing fears. He trusted her entirely—laying bare all the weaknesses of genius, and confiding himself wholly to her mercy. He talked to her as he had never talked to man or woman in his life before; and perhaps she in all the world was the only creature who knew that Mr. William Crawford believed in his own genius.

"I know how small I am, if you weigh me in the balance with the men of the past," he said: "Good heavens! where did they get their power, those demi-gods of art? There is a head of Christ by Quentin Matsys, in the Museum at Antwerp, and the eyes that look at you out of the canvas are human eyes, dim with tears. There is a *chasse* in the hospital at Bruges, painted by Memling, which you could look at for a year, and find new

wonders in it every year. And you remember Van Eyck's Adoration of the Lamb—the crimsons and purples, all the brightness of summer in the green trees and winding blue rivers. The power to paint like that seems to have vanished off the face of the earth. And yet we love our art, and work hard, and do good things, too, in our way. I wonder whether the men of the future will measure themselves against us, centuries after we are dead and gone, and talk despairingly of our power. I suppose every work of genius is sanctified by time, and that if Rubens lived in the next street, we should have plenty to say about the violence of his colour and the audacity of his foreshortening. What should we think of the Pyramids if they had been built yesterday? We go into raptures about those great piles of stone because it is some thousands of years more or less since they were erected; but who ever talks of the monster hotels? And yet I think the monster hotels are quite as wonderful as the Pyramids, and I should just as soon expect domestic comfort in the one as in the other. Depend upon it, Mrs. Champer-

nowne, we are all just a little fooled by the Past. If a man sent the Venus de Milo to Trafalgar Square to-morrow, there would be plenty of Art-critics ready to declare that her head was too large for her body, or that her knees were afflicted with white swelling."

Many times during that early spring did the siren plead for a glimpse of the picture; but on this point William Crawford was resolute—even to her.

"What would you have thought of my Aspasia, if you had seen her a month before she was finished?" he said, when the widow entreated for one peep at the Dido. The inexhaustible *Æneid* had furnished the subject for the new picture. "I assure you there was a period in which she appeared in the last stage of intoxication. My model is a figurante at Drury Lane. Don't shrug your shoulders so contemptuously, Mrs. Champernowne. She is a very good little girl, though she does dance behind a row of footlights for a guinea a week—a girl with the face of an angel, and the figure of a Dutch doll. I have to find my Dido

her arms and shoulders between this and May; but if you will come to my painting-room during the first week in April—"

"If I will come!" cried the widow impatiently; "I have a good mind to make my way into your painting-room some night like a burglar, and look at your Dido and Æneas by the light of a bull's-eye lantern, as they say Mr. Morlais painted his 'Queen of Lydia unrobing.' I hope Æneas is handsome."

"O, poor fellow, he is a professional model, who has been handsome in his day, but whose beauty has succumbed beneath the influence of gin-and-water. My Æneas shall take after his mother. I have been studying all the types of the Greek Aphrodité in order to find the head I want."

"I heartily despise that poor stupid Dido, and I have always detested Æneas," said the widow; "it is my belief that his piety was of the Pecksniffian order, and that he only carried his father in order that he might have an excuse for losing his wife. But I am dying to see your

picture nevertheless, and I shall count the days between this and April."

The days passed quickly enough in spite of Mrs. Champernowne's impatience; and early in that capricious month the painter stood before his finished picture, waiting the widow's visit. He had been putting the last touches to the canvas during that very morning; and even now he had his palette in his hand, and hovered restlessly before his easel every now and then, as if he would fain have made some new attack upon Dido or her cruel lover.

"If Mrs. Champernowne doesn't come directly, I shall do something dreadful to the Trojan's nose," he muttered, looking at the big clock. "His nostrils are a thought too red, as it is: another touch of vermilion, and he would look as if his nose had been bleeding. You are a lovely creature, Dido; though perhaps I have no right to say so. There are the wheels, and the bell,—'She is coming, my love, my sweet.' I hope they have arranged a nice luncheon. I'll go out and meet her."

The painter laid down his palette and ran to the portico, beneath which Mrs. Champernowne appeared with her niece in attendance. Charming as she was always, she had never been more delightful than to-day, with her pretty air of impatience, her bewitching assumption of sisterly interest in the painter's triumph.

"Take me straight to the painting-room, please," she said, as Mr. Crawford moved towards the open door of the drawing-room. He obeyed her, and led her at once to the big tapestried chamber, where the perfume of jonquils and hyacinths blew in under the open window.

The great picture stood opposite to the door, and Mrs. Champernowne sank silently into a low chair which the painter had placed for her at some little distance from the easel. It was a perfect feast of colour, a banquet of beauty. The painter had chosen for his subject the humiliation of the Carthaginian queen at the feet of her lover. Dido has heard of the Trojan's intended departure, and the first storm of passion has spent itself. She has come to implore him to remain;

she came to reproach him for his cruelty, but love has been stronger than indignation, and in her tears and her passion she has fallen prostrate at his feet, her hands clasped, her eyes uplifted to his thoughtful face, her golden hair falling about her in a glittering shower, her regal mantle of white and gold streaming on the ground as she kneels. There are real tears in her blue eyes, so deep in their violet shadow, so brilliant in their light. You see the traces of tears that she has dashed away with an impassioned hand, still glittering on the golden fringe of her lashes; and in every articulation of the intertwined fingers, in the convulsive contraction of the lovely lips, the lines that wrinkle the ivory brow, you behold the evidences of her despair. William Crawford's Dido is no beautiful doll, but a living, breathing woman, sublimely lovely in her womanly anguish.

Æneas, disturbed and compassionate, but still resolute, has only a secondary interest in the picture. He is listening, and will speak presently; and you feel that he will be courteous and ten-

der, and gentlemanly, in his answer to that fond, appealing creature. But the passion and the despair are Dido's, and the interest of the picture is hers.

In every detail of his great work William Crawford had shown himself a poet as well as a painter. The atmosphere was not of Kensington, but of Carthage. It was evening; and athwart barbaric pillars you saw the sun going redly down behind a waveless sea, while far above dim stars glimmered in an opal-tinted sky. A faint languorous mist crept over the purple distance; but the foreground of the picture was one glow of gorgeous colour. The tessellated pavement on which the queen of Carthage knelt was inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold, curtains of strangely-mingled hues trailed from the cornices of the chamber, revealing glimpses of a wall covered with broad bands of black and red. The gaudy plumage of strange birds made a confusion of colour amidst the purple cushions of a low couch that filled a niche in the curtained wall, and the western sunlight was re-

flected redly on the water in a shallow basin of jasper and onyx, over the margin of which hung a woman's embroidered garment.

The widow sat before the picture in perfect silence. There was no affectation in her love of art; and seated before the painter's work, she seemed unconscious of the painter's presence. But it was not so with her niece, who gave utterance to all those rapturous exclamations peculiar to persons of her sex and age.

"O, how lovely, Mr. Crawford!" cried this young lady; "your Dido is a most exquisite creature, and I am sure your picture will be *the* picture of the year. I had no idea the Carthaginian costume was so becoming, or that Carthaginians ever had that lovely golden hair. Isn't she beautiful, Aunt Georgina?"

"Go and amuse yourself in Mr. Crawford's garden, Helen," Mrs. Champernowne exclaimed impatiently. "If *I* am to enjoy this picture, I must see it in peace. Your 'how lovelys!' and 'how beautifuls!' are most distracting. You are always going into raptures about hyacinths; you

can look at Mr. Crawford's hyacinths and go into raptures about them."

"I should very much like to see the garden," the young lady replied discreetly; and having received the painter's permission, she flitted away through the open window and disappeared in the trellised walk in which Philip Foley had nursed his despair.

The widow sat for some minutes after her niece's departure still silent, with her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes fixed on the canvas in solemn contemplation. At last she drew a long breath, a sigh of relief, as of one who had been held for a while breathless and spell-bound; and then the painter ventured to speak to her.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked nervously.

She turned to look at him with eyes that were dim with tears.

"It is great," she said, in a voice so subdued as to be almost a whisper; "it is worthy of you. I am proud of your triumph. I cannot tell you how proud I am."

Never until that moment had he seen tears in

the eyes of his siren; never until that moment had he lost command of himself; never until then had sober common-sense failed to pluck him backward with a relentless hand when he faltered on the brink of folly; but the tears in Georgina Champernowne's eyes were too much for common-sense. For the last six months the painter had known that the moment must come sooner or later when his own rash hand would destroy the airy fabric of his folly. The fatal moment came to-day, and he was powerless to struggle against his destiny. He gave one furtive glance towards the garden, where Miss Vicary's light-silk dress glanced hither and thither among the flower-beds, and then he laid his hand on the back of the widow's chair and bent his head to speak to her.

"Do you know how dangerous it is for you to speak to me like that?" he asked.

"Dangerous? How or why dangerous?"

She looked up at him with the very expression he had so often imagined, the pretty air of unconsciousness, in which there was neither displeasure nor alarm; only an innocent surprise.

It seemed to him as if he had acted this scene a hundred times before, and knew what the end was to be—so constantly had he acted it in his day-dreams, so often had he imagined its bitter termination.

"Dangerous for you, trebly dangerous for me, because when you assume an interest in my work, a pride in my fame, you tempt me beyond my strength. You tempt me to say that which may make us strangers from the moment you leave this house to-day. My work and my fame are yours,—yours to trample under your feet if you please; for you have only to tell me to-morrow that my art is distasteful to you, and I, who have been the slave of art for five-and-twenty laborious years, will never touch a brush again. You have been fatally kind to me during the past few months, Mrs. Champernowne. You have admitted me to a friendship which must embitter the remainder of my existence—unless you are prepared to make that existence unspeakably happy. You must have expected this—or something like this. You could not imagine that I could see

you day after day, and be with you week after week, without loving you, as I do love you; as I think only a man of my age and of my concentrated life can love."

The widow sat with her face turned away from the painter, her eyes fixed on his picture. The soft folds of her cashmere shawl were slightly stirred by her hurried breathing, but her attitude was statuesque as the attitude of Dido herself.

"I am very sorry," she said softly; "very, very sorry."

"Sorry that I love you?"

"I am sorry that you should speak so seriously."

"How would you have me speak? How can you expect that I should be otherwise than serious? You must know that I love you—you must know that I have loved you ever since you first admitted me to your intimacy, ever since you first assumed a friendly interest in my career. Yours is too sympathetic a nature for the coquette's heartless ignorance. You could not have been unconscious of such love as mine."

"I never dreamt that you felt so deeply. If —if I fancied sometimes that you valued my friendship more, far more than it was worth, I thought you were only like some of my other friends, who are pleased to think better of me than I deserve to be thought of; friends who pay me pretty compliments whenever they come to see me, and forget my existence half an hour after they have left my house. Why should you be so much more in earnest than they?"

"You are only equivocating with me, Mrs. Champernowne; you must have known that I was in earnest."

"I never thought about it. I knew that your society was very delightful to me, but I never for a moment imagined that such a friendship as ours could result in unhappiness to either of us. And why should our friendship have any such result? Why should I not continue to be interested in your career? why should not you come to see me whenever you please? Is friendship impossible between a man and woman, even when both have bidden adieu to youth? Promise me that you will

never again say the desperate kind of things you have been saying to-day; and I will promise to take pleasure in your society to my dying day. Why should we not be like Cowper and Mrs. Unwin? You are not mad, and I am not evangelical; but I think that is rather an advantage. Promise, Mr. Crawford, and let us be friends for ever and ever."

She held out her hand, and the painter took it tenderly in both his own. Could he have refused to take that hand, even if it had held the sentence of his death?

"I cannot make such a promise," he said gravely; "I love you too dearly to be your friend. There is not an hour I have spent in your society during the last two years in which I have not been on the brink of telling you what I have told you to-day."

"O, but that is positively dreadful," cried the widow archly; "friendship must be quite impossible if one's friends are always to be on the brink of saying desperate things."

"Don't laugh at me, Mrs. Champernowne;

my future life depends upon the answer you give me to-day. Against my own reason, against my own will, I have yielded myself up heart and soul to the fascination you exercise over me. I had not been in your house half-a-dozen times before I knew that if it was not my road to paradise, it was my road to perdition—and yet I came. I knew that you had money, high family, fashion; and that in your narrow world of the West-end I should be laughed at for my presumption, if it was known that I hoped to win you for my wife: and yet I came. I was quite prepared for what has happened to-day. I never really hoped. I never in sober sadness believed that you would answer me otherwise than you have answered me. I only let myself drift. You asked me to come to you, and I came; and I should have gone on and on, crawling to your feet like a lap-dog for ever and ever, if the impulse of the moment had not been too strong for me to-day."

"Our friendship was very dear to me," answered Mrs. Champernowne; "I am sorry that it must end."

"I am sorry that it should ever have begun," responded the painter passionately; "do you think a man has no more heart nor mind than one of your Angora cats? Do you think you can play with his heart for a year or two, and then give it back to him none the worse for your year's amusement, and tell him to take it somewhere else? You have no right to trifle with honest men as you have trifled with me. You have no right to encourage my folly for your own amusement, and then tell me that you never thought I was in earnest. You knew that I was in earnest; and it was because of my earnestness that you found me more amusing than your other admirers. Where they burned the conventional flame that passes in society for real fire, I consumed my heart and soul; and now you affect unconsciousness. You offer me your friendship; the right to go on being miserable, the privilege of sacrificing my life and my art for the sake of an occasional hour in your drawing-room. You have been selfish and cruel, Mrs. Champernowne."

He walked to the window, turning his back

upon the siren. But the siren was not made angry by this discourtesy. She was sincerely sorry for his grief and his passion. It was the story of Dido and Æneas over again; only in this modern instance of the classic legend, it was the lady who was cool and clear-headed, and the gentleman who was passionate and unreasonable. The painter threw himself into a chair by the fireplace; and sat with his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, his face hidden by his hand. Miss Vicary, who had been flitting restlessly about the garden, came towards the window at this moment; but the widow waved her back with a gesture which was unseen by William Crawford.

He had been sitting in the same attitude for some minutes, when his visitor came softly to the hearth, and seated herself in the chair opposite to him.

"Come, Mr. Crawford, let us talk seriously," she said.

"I have been only too serious from first to last."

"I believe that; and I am bound to speak frankly to you. You will think me very cold-hearted, very unwomanly, very selfish, when I have spoken; but it is better that you should think of me as I really am. Let me first assure you that I truly value your friendship, and that I shall be heartily sorry if I cannot retain it. But—but—I am selfish; and my present mode of life is so agreeable to me, that I cannot bring myself to change it. You, who have been your own master always, free to follow your art, free to live your own life without question or hindrance, can scarcely imagine what a precious thing liberty is to any one who has suffered a long slavery. I am not going to tell you any piteous story of my past life; it has been what people call a very fortunate and favoured existence. But until I was thirty years of ago I never knew what it was to be my own mistress. Up to my eighteenth birthday I was subject to the discipline of a convent. Very gentle, very wise, that discipline was; but every book I read, every letter I wrote,

every country ramble or summer holiday, every garment I wore, was regulated and arranged for me by others. I left my convent-school pining for freedom, and found myself subject to the guardianship of a very strict father and an uncompromising elder sister. In a twelve-month a visitor came; there was a little private discussion. I was summoned to my father's study one summer morning, and was told that my fate had been arranged for me; and that I had nothing to do but to thank Providence for my good fortune. Six weeks afterwards I married a man old enough to be my father, and began a new slavery. I had the best and kindest of masters, and my bondage ought not to have been very irksome to me; but it was bondage, and I thirsted for liberty. I venture to hope that I did my duty. My husband thanked and blessed me on his death-bed, in words whose memory is very tender and precious to me. Since his death I have been free; and I have lived my own life. A very simple life, as you know; but, O, so delicious

to me in its untrammelled ease. I read what books I like; I keep what hours I like; I choose my own friends; I abandon myself to every caprice of the moment. If I want to waste my time, I waste it, and there is no one to complain. If I want to throw away money, I throw it away with open hands, and there is no one to show me a long list of items in his banker's pass-book. If I were seized to-night with a fancy for starting off to Naples, or Cairo, or Constantinople, or the Caucasus, I should tell my maid to pack a portmanteau, and be off by the first train to-morrow morning. But a woman with a husband must employ the diplomacy of a Metternich to obtain a trip to Brighton. Many men have asked me to abandon this precious freedom; but I have never been so candid as I am with you to-day. I know you must despise me for my selfishness; but I hope you will try to forgive me. Accept me, if you can, for what I am worth, and continue to be my friend."

"I cannot continue to be that which I have

never been," answered the painter sadly. "I have never been your friend. I am inclined to think that friendship is only possible where any thing beyond friendship is out of the question. I have always loved you; and I must go on loving you till the end of my life. I think it will be better for us both that all intimacy between us should end to-day. I thank you for your candour. There are some men, perhaps, who would go on hoping against hope, even after what you have said to me. But then I have never really hoped. I spoke to you to-day because I was no longer able to keep silence; not because I thought that any good could come of what I had to say. There is one thing more that I am bound to speak of, and then I have done for ever. I know that you are too generous to suspect me of being influenced in the smallest measure by the consideration of any worldly advantage to be derived from a union with you. But I am bound to tell you, that had your answer been a different one—had it been the answer which I never hoped it would be—I should have re-

ligiously abstained from profiting in the most insignificant manner by any superiority of fortune which you may have over me. My art brings me four or five thousand a-year, and would, I am told, bring me double that amount, if I cared to throw myself in the way of making larger gains. I feel myself compelled to tell you this, Mrs. Champernowne; for while there are fortune-hunters in the world, honest men must defend themselves from the possibility of suspicion."

"I am sorry you should think it necessary to defend yourself where I am concerned."

"Forgive me for thinking it barely possible you might do me wrong.—And you really like the Dido?"

There was a long pause between the two sentences. Mrs. Champernowne felt the full significance of that pause. She knew that in returning to the subject of his picture, the painter had made an end for ever of that other subject, so much nearer to his heart.

"I think you have surpassed yourself; and

I shall look forward with pride to your success.—Surely you have seen enough of those hyacinths, Helen! You may come in and see the picture now, if you will promise to moderate your raptures."

Thus appealed to, the young lady crossed the threshold of the window with as unconscious an air as if she had been quite unaware of any thing peculiar in the interview between her aunt and the painter. She became straightway absorbed in the contemplation of Dido, while the widow arranged her bonnet-strings before the cheval-glass provided for the accommodation of the "young persons" who sat to Mr. Crawford.

Mrs. Champernowne was some little time arranging her bonnet-strings; and the face which the painter's furtive glance showed him reflected in the glass was very pale.

"You will stop and take some luncheon," he said presently, when his visitors were leaving the painting-room. "I have had it prepared for you."

"You are very kind; but we dine at four;

and it is half-past three now. A thousand thanks for our private view; and good-bye."

"Good-bye. I am coming to the carriage with you."

When she was seated in her brougham, Mrs. Champernowne for the second time offered her hand to the painter, while the most discreet of nieces looked out of the opposite window.

"Is it really to be good-bye?" she asked, as Mr. Crawford pressed the slender hand gently before releasing it.

"Believe me it is better so. I thank you much for your interest in my work. I shall be hoping to please you when I am painting for other people. Good-bye."

"And you are not angry with me?"

"I have no right to be angry. What am I to tell your servant?"

This inquiry had relation to the most discreet of footmen, who hovered in attendance; second only to the most discreet of nieces in his assumption of unconsciousness.

"Home, if you please," answered Mrs. Cham-

pernowne with a little sigh of vexation. The siren had entertained a special penchant for this particular victim, and she did not like to see him escape alive and whole from amongst the corpses floating in the dim shades of her fatal cavern. The most discreet of nieces found her aunt by no means easy to please during the rest of that day; and the favourite Angora cat, repulsed and discomfited, was fain to creep into his elegant lair of quilted satin and wicker-work.

"It is very hard that at five-and-thirty a woman cannot have a friend," thought the widow, as she pretended to dose by the hearth where the painter had so often found her in the dusky light, with her feet buried in the fleecy depths of the Polar-bear skin, and a faint glow from the fire glimmering here and there among the silken folds of her dress. "It is really very hard, for I liked him so much.'

William Crawford watched the widow's brougham drive away, and then went slowly back to his painting-room. He carried a weary

spirit to the shrine of Art, the great consoler; but to-day even the face of the serene goddess was darkened for him, as it had been years ago, when his young wife's death left him desolate. He stopped before his picture for a few minutes, looking at it wonderingly, lost in admiration of his own work.

"I have painted *that*," he thought; "and yet I am not happy!"

It was no impulse of vanity that prompted the thought. The artist would be something less than an artist if he did not recognise the beauty of his own creations. Even in this picture, to which he had given so much thought and labour, there were shortcomings which the painter's eye was quick to perceive: but he was proud of his finished work nevertheless; and he sat looking at it with a strange mixture of pride and sadness.

"I have nothing but my art now," he said, "nothing—nothing. My daughter is a lady of fashion, too busy to spend a day in this quiet house. The woman I love is selfish and heartless. I have nothing but my art. Perhaps I

ought to be very glad of that. I can make my painting-room my pillar, and live in a solitude as complete as St. Simeon Stylites found in his uncomfortable elevation. You shall have a companion, Dido, before the year is done."

CHAPTER IV.

THE EASY DESCENT.

Mr. O'Boyneville presented himself at Pevenshall early in the month of February, in response to Cecil's renewed entreaty that she might be allowed to return to her home and its duties. There was no small sacrifice involved in his tearing himself from the delights of the law-courts even for a few days; but having once turned his back upon Westminster Hall, he abandoned himself freely to the pleasures of social intercourse. He was delighted with his wife's improved looks, and thanked Mrs. Lobyer in his heartiest manner for the change which her influence had wrought.

"However closely I may stick to my work, you must never lead such a dreary life again, dear," he said.

"She never shall," cried Flo eagerly. "We are coming to town in March. Mr. Lobyer has taken a house in Mortimer Gardens—one of those

new houses overlooking Hyde Park—and I mean to be tremendously gay; and Cecil must come to all my parties."

Lady Cecil declared that the gaieties at Pevenshall were sufficient to last her a twelvemonth; but neither Mr. O'Boyneville nor Mrs. Lobyer would hear of this; and there was a friendly compact concluded between them, to the effect that Cecil was not to be permitted to bury herself alive in Brunswick Square during the ensuing season.

Mr. O'Boyneville spent three days at Pevenshall, where he made himself as completely at home as it was his custom to make himself wherever he went. There was a dash of the Yankee in the character of the popular Hibernian, and it was not in him to be constrained or ill at ease by reason of any lurking doubts as to his own merits. Big, and hearty, and genial, he stood with his back against Mr. Lobyer's own particular mantelpiece, and talked down the best of the club-men and the grandest of the county squires; careless whom he pleased or whom he offended.

Major Gordon dined at Pevenshall on one of

the three days; and Mr. O'Boyneville attacked him on the subject of the late war. Always well posted in his *Times*, the barrister seemed to be as familiar with the Indian campaign as the man who had been through it.

"And how about that affair at Allacapoodur, when Sir Tristram Belpier made his fellows put their lances under their left arms, and job downwards as they rode over the enemy? That lying down of the Sikhs and firing after the charge was a clever move; but they got it hot that day. And what of Colonel Menkinson's tactics at Bundlebad? was that charge of the light infantry a wise thing or not?" demanded Mr. O'Boyneville. This sort of conversation went on all through the dinner. At first there was some slight reserve in the Major's manner to Lady Cecil's husband; but the ice melted little by little beneath the influence of Indian reminiscences; and before the evening ended, a friendly familiarity had arisen between the two men.

The barrister begged that Major Gordon would make a point of visiting Brunswick Square when-

ever he found himself in London; and the Major responded with a vaguely-polite acknowledgment which committed him to nothing.

"You are a kind of relative of my wife's, you know," said Mr. O'Boyneville; "and we ought to know more of each other."

Very early in March, Mrs. Lobyer's thoroughbred chestnuts and powdered footmen astonished the quiet inhabitants of Bloomsbury, and Cecil found herself seated by her friend's side in the Lady's Mile. Whatever preference she might have had for the dull tranquillity of her own drawing-room she was obliged to forego; for her husband and her friend conspired together in order to force her into the agreeable whirlpool of West-end London. And then she was really attached to Flo. She was really anxious about this frivolous, unstable creature, surrounded by so many temptations, supported by so little moral strength. She was really concerned for the tranquillity of Mrs. Lobyer's life; for Sir Nugent Evershed had taken possession of chambers in

St. James's Street, and was to be met very frequently at the new house in Mortimer Gardens; and where Florence Lobyer was concerned, Sir Nugent and danger were associated in the mind of Lady Cecil.

In the new Tyburnian mansion all the glories of Pevenshall were repeated on a smaller scale. There were more encaustic tiles, more parqueterie floors, more bronze and or-molu balustrades, more ceilings picked out in gold and colour, more monster Sèvres vases, and tiger-skin rugs. The glittering freshness and brightness of the rooms had an oppressive effect upon the senses of people accustomed to ordinary dwellings.

"There might be some hope for a *parvenu*, if he could live long enough to wear the edge off his wealth," said one of the clubmen, after dining for the first time in Mortimer Gardens; "but the modern span of life does not give a millionaire time to overcome the appalling freshness of his possessions. He is like a working-man in his Sunday clothes. The Sunday clothes are always new. In such a house as this you

see the stamp of the *nouveau riche* on every object, from the virgin gilding on the ceilings to the untarnished lacquer on the letter-weights. Show me a man's carpets, and I will tell you the length of his pedigree. The *vieille roche* rarely indulges in fresh upholstery. At Lord Scamander's you can poke your cane through the carpet; and if any one attempted to draw the window-curtains, they would crumble into ashes, like the draperies of a house in Pompeii. Old Lady Teucer will have an action for damages brought against her some day, if she doesn't take up her stair-carpets; for one runs the risk of breaking one's neck every time one calls on her. If I were a millionaire, I would watch the sales at Christie's, and buy up all the dilapidated buhl cabinets and rotten tapestry, in order that I might swear they had belonged to my great-grandfather. I wouldn't have an ounce of plate on my table of a later date than the reign of Queen Anne, or a sound carpet on my floors."

Mr. Lobyer was supremely indifferent as to what his guests might please to say or to think

about him. In London, as in Yorkshire, the cares of the speculator had possession of him. That undying worm which torments the rich man, who never knows when he has made enough money, and is always trying by every tortuous and darksome process to make more, had made its home in the breast of Mr. Lobyer; and for such a man the frivolous pleasures which amuse ordinary people have very little attraction. In London, as in Yorkshire, Mr. Lobyer had amusements of his own and companions of his own, and left his wife to amuse herself after her own fashion, and amongst whatever acquaintance she might choose for herself. For this helpless young creature—so lonely amidst so much splendour, so friendless amidst so many friends—Cecil felt unbounded compassion.

"But what am I, that I should be any comfort or protection to her?" the barrister's wife thought sadly. "Who could be weaker than I was at the first sound of *his* voice? Who could cling more wickedly to the memory of the past than I have done since I have seen him?"

At her husband's wish Lady Cecil went back amongst her old set. The season was a brilliant one, and she went out two and three times a-week. Sometimes with her aunt, often with Mrs. Lobyer; sometimes, but very seldom, with Mr. O'Boyneville. He wished her to be gay and happy; and she obeyed him. At first with reluctance; but by and by with a guilty pleasure. The words which Ruth spoke to Naomi contain the epitome of a wife's duty; and Cecil had long abandoned all hope of doing her duty in such a spirit. Her husband's people were not her people; his home was not her home. If she had been suffered to go her own way, she would have observed the letter of her duty; and the spirit would perhaps have come to her in due time. But a kind of fatality seemed to pervade her life; and the hand which should have sustained her within the quiet precincts of her home pushed her, with well-intentioned ruthlessness, out into the world.

Hector Gordon came to London in April; and Lady Cecil met him very often. There

were so many places at which they were likely to meet, and they were constantly meeting, though the Major paid no visit in Brunswick Square; whereupon the barrister condemned him as a snob, who did not care to risk his reputation by being seen in an unfashionable neighbourhood.

Lady Cecil and Hector met very often. At first the icy reserve with which they accosted each other seemed an insuperable barrier, not to be broken down or worn away; but little by little this freezing coldness of manner gave place to a gradual thaw. Some chance allusion to the past, to a book read at Fortinbras, the subject of some old argument worn threadbare in those idle autumn days, carried them back all at once to something of the old intimacy; as it had been before the storm-cloud of passion disturbed the serenity of their friendship.

Mrs. MacClaverhouse was delighted to have her nephew with her again, and he came to Dorset Square as he pleased. If by a series of coincidences he happened generally to be there when Lady Cecil was with her aunt, the dowager was

too frivolous and too much absorbed by her own pleasures and her own interests to be alarmed by the fact. She was very fond of Hector; and she knew that his return to England had brought her many things which were dear to her heart. Besides his usual tribute of Indian shawls and ivory caskets, the Major made his aunt many substantial and useful offerings. He begged her to recruit her exhausted cellar from the stores of his wine-merchant; and with his own pencil marked the choicer vintages in the merchant's catalogue. He presented the dowager with a stylish landau in place of the phantom chariot; and in divers manners enhanced that lady's comfort and respectability by his generosity.

"He brings sunshine with him wherever he goes," said the incautious dowager. "And to think that he should be a widower, with all the girls in London setting their caps at him, I daresay! O Cecil, Cecil, what a pity you were in such a hurry to marry that big blustering barrister!"

This was the most cruel blow which Mrs. MacClaverhouse had ever inflicted on her niece.

Cecil's reproachful look smote her with some sense of shame.

"Well, I know I encouraged Mr. O'Boyneville," she said; "and of course he's a very excellent fellow, and tolerably well off—only tolerably, as things go nowadays. But still it *is* a pity, you know, Cecil. However, there is nobody to be blamed; for who could imagine that poor namby-pamby wife of Hector's was going to die?"

"Auntie, you musn't talk like that," Cecil answered hastily. "My husband is good and kind and generous-minded, and I am very happy with him."

This last statement was false; and what is worse, the speaker knew it to be false. But she fancied that it was her duty to say it, nevertheless. Perhaps she had some faint hope that by force of repetition it would come in time to be true.

At what point did the path in which she was treading swerve from its straight course and become a fatal and crooked way, leading she knew not whither? Lady Cecil never knew when her footsteps first strayed across the invisible borderline between right and wrong; but she did know

that a time came when her eyes met her husband's honest glance with a gaze that was not altogether fearless, when a vague sense of remorse oppressed her in her husband's presence.

Alas for that fatal whirlpool of West-end life, those dangerous meetings on staircases and in conservatories, those idle mornings at horticultural fêtes, those sunny afternoons on race-courses, where the clamour of half-a-million voices drowns the insidious whisper of one voice for all but the too eager listener; and the chance encounters in the crowd, and the water-parties, and the festal gatherings in shadowy gardens by the rippling river! Alas for all the machinery which the modern Mephistopheles finds made ready for his hand when he undertakes the perdition of any given victim!

Before the season was over Cecil and Hector had drifted back into the old companionship. No word had been uttered by the Major to which the most fiery of Hibernian husbands could have taken objection. But the friendship of a man and a woman who have at one period in their lives been something more than friends is very apt to

be a dangerous friendship. In this whirlpool of West-end life Cecil had no time for self-examination—even if self-examination were a process to which the human mind is inclined. If she was doing wrong—if she had passed the impalpable boundary-line, she shut her eyes to the fact, and would not remember those hidden dangers towards which she was drifting. If the days on which she met Hector Gordon were very pleasant to her, she beguiled herself with the idea that her pleasure arose from other causes than the soldier's presence. What was he but an element in the crowd? And as a woman is not gifted with the faculty of logic, Cecil did not take the trouble to ask herself why the crowd seemed so dull and vapid without him.

She could see Mrs. Lobyer's danger, for that was a peril of a palpable and obvious nature. It is impossible for a young matron to indulge in a chronic flirtation with one of the most eligible single men of the season unnoticed and unslandered. But Flo did not object to being slandered a little. The furtive glances of dowagers and the whisperings of faded beauties gave zest to her life.

"It's no use talking to me, Cecil," she said when her friend remonstrated with her. "You know that I care about as much for Sir Nugent Evershed as I care for this parasol; but it gives me tone to have him dancing attendance upon me. He brings me people whom Mr. Lobyer's money would never beguile across my threshold; and I should be a lost creature without him."

"But if your father were to hear one malicious word about you, Flo—"

"My dearest Cecil, that is just the kind of thing one's father never does hear. If I were to commit a murder to-morrow, I should like to know who would tell my father any thing about it. Unless he read the affair in the newspapers, he might go down to his grave in happy ignorance of my iniquity. And after I had been hung, his acquaintance would shake their heads and say, 'That sad attack of bronchitis,—so young —so lovely; but I always told Mrs. Lobyer that the throat was the vulnerable part,—' and so on."

Between Florence Lobyer and Major Gordon there arose a very cordial alliance. He as well

as Sir Nugent had the power of bringing nice people to Mrs. Lobyer's house; and to surround herself with such people was now the supreme ambition of that lady's mind. All the substantial glories and grandeurs of this life—all the splendours that can be bought with money were hers—and she had now only to find eligible guests for her brilliant drawing-rooms, the last fashionable lions to roar at her crowded assemblies. Directly Aladdin has hung up his roc's egg, he begins to spread his lures for the *élite* of the city; and will be miserable if they remember his father's trade, and are slow to attend his parties. All the best military men in London were known to Hector Gordon; and through his agency the heaviest of martial swells were secured for Mrs. Lobyer's evenings. Her gratitude was boundless. Her dear Major Gordon could not come to Mortimer Gardens too often.

"And you must come to Pevenshall in September," she said. "I believe the woods swarm with hares and pheasants—if you care for that sort of thing—and you shall bring as

many people as you like; and dear Mrs. MacGlaverhouse must come, and Cecil of course. We shall not go on the Continent this year. I couldn't go through another autumn of picture-galleries and cathedrals without endangering the state of my brain."

While Flo extended the circle of her acquaintance, and vied with women of established position in the splendour and number of her entertainments, William Crawford went his quiet way, and held himself aloof from the parvenu grandeurs of Mortimer Gardens. The "Dido" was an undisputed success, and Florence received the congratulations of her artistic acquaintance on her father's triumph. There was another success of the season, which she heard of with strangely-mingled feelings of pleasure, pride, and shame—the achievement of a young landscape-painter called Foley, whose "Sunset on the Danube" had raised him at once to no mean position in the ranks of young painters. Flo went to see the picture, and thought a little sadly of her old adorer. There were two little bits by the same

hand, hanging low down beneath larger subjects; and finding both these bits unsold on the day of the private view, Mrs. Lobyer secured them for Pevenshall. For some unknown reason she did not choose that her own name should appear in the transaction, and commissioned Sir Nugent to buy the pictures.

As the season advanced, Cecil spent less and less of her time in Bloomsbury. If she contrived to dine at home three or four times a-week, her mornings were generally spent in some fashionable amusement, her evenings devoted to some fashionable assembly.

Mrs. Lobyer had her box on the grand tier at Covent Garden; and was never happy unless her dearest Cecil accompanied her to hear every new opera, and to criticise every début. So, when there were no other engagements, there was always the Opera; and it seemed as if Cecil was never again to spend her evenings at home.

What did it matter? Mr. O'Boyneville had his after-dinner sleep, and his papers; then his long evening in the seclusion of his study. He

received his cups of tea from the respectful Pupkin, instead of from the white hands of his wife; and beyond this, Lady Cecil's absence or presence must have been the same to him.

This is how Cecil reasoned when her conscience smote her on the subject of her perpetual gaieties. Of course she was quite ignorant of that vague sense of satisfaction,—that dim consciousness of a dear companionship,—which the barrister had been wont to derive from his wife's presence even while he slept. And was not her husband always the first to urge her acceptance of every tempting invitation?

"Enjoy yourself as much as you can while the season lasts, dear," he said; "and don't trouble yourself about me. In a few years I shall have made the future safe; and then you shall have a house at the West-end, and I'll enjoy life with you."

At the Opera Cecil almost always met Hector Gordon. He was one of the privileged visitors to Mrs. Lobyer's box, and he availed himself of his privilege very frequently; not dropping in

for a few minutes between the acts to murmur polite inanities, with his opera-hat in his hand, but abandoning his stall altogether, and taking up his place behind Cecil's chair.

One night when Sir Nugent Evershed was in attendance upon Mrs. Lobyer, and when the two were too much engaged by their own conversation to be observant of their companions, Hector Gordon spoke to Cecil for the first time of that unforgotten interview at Fortinbras. The frozen barrier that had separated them at first had long ago melted. A dangerous friendship had arisen between them; but as yet no fatal word—no actual transgression of the right, had sullied Cecil's life. Her sin had been that she had wilfully shut her eyes to the perils of such a friendship,—that she had obstinately refused to see the gulf towards the brink of which her footsteps were straying. She had loved him so dearly;—alas for her broken marriage-vow, she loved him so dearly still!—and his companionship was so sweet to her. She could not banish this charm from her life. This year,

for the first time since those autumn days at Fortinbras, she had known entire happiness—dangerous happiness,—fatal happiness, perhaps; but that all-absorbing delight of the present,—that brief intoxication of perfect joy, which shuts out all thought of the future.

If she had sinned unconsciously until to-night, she must henceforward sin with a full knowledge of her guiltiness: for to-night the flimsy veil of a pretended friendship was rent aside, and Hector Gordon spoke to her as he had no right to speak to another man's wife.

The conversation arose out of one of those accidental commonplaces from which such conversations generally do arise. It began amidst the crash of a chorus in the *Huguenots*. The Major had been admiring Cecil's bouquet of white azalias. As he bent over the flowers, he tried to draw one of the frail blossoms away from the rest, but Cecil took the bouquet from his hand.

"You will spoil it," she said; "those fragile flowers will not bear being disturbed."

"And you refuse me even that? Do you

know that I have not a shred of ribbon, a scrap of writing, a book, a flower, not the smallest object that has belonged to you?"

She tried to look at him bravely, but the guilty throbbing of her heart told her how weak she was, and her eyelids fell under his gaze; the same gaze she remembered at Fortinbras, but with less mournfulness and more passion.

"What of that?" she asked; "why should you have any thing of mine?"

He did not answer her question, but continued, in a tone of reproach:

"And now that I want to take away some relic of to-night—perhaps the last night that I may ever spend in your society—you refuse me even a flower—a flower that your hand has touched!"

"The last night?" said Cecil.

"Yes, in all probability, the last night. These are no times for feather-bed soldiers. We have sailing orders for Japan, and we shall leave London in a few days."

"And you go to Japan?"

"Naturally, I go where my regiment goes.

Are you sorry that I am going? O Cecil, for pity's sake tell me that you are sorry!"

"I am very sorry."

She would have recalled the words the moment they were spoken, but it was too late. The soldier's head bent in the shadow of the curtain, and his hand clasped hers. She drew it away from him indignantly; but she was obliged to repress any overt expression of her indignation, since Florence and Sir Nugent were so very close at hand.

"I am sorry on my aunt's account," she said; "for myself individually your departure can make very little difference. If your regiment were not ordered to Japan, I suppose it would be sent to Manchester, or Edinburgh, or York, or Dublin. You would be quite as far away at Manchester as you can be in Japan."

"Do you think the distance between London and Manchester would separate me from you, Cecil? Do you think any distance—the whole width of the world—would divide me from you if—But you talk to me as if I were the most commonplace acquaintance on your visiting-list.

You have always been cruel to me:—cruel to-night; cruel at Fortinbras; cold and cruel. You thought that what you did was for the best, but it was not for the best; and if you had loved me, you could never have done it. I tried to do my duty, but I was never really happy with that poor devoted girl. I was never really happy with her, though I was heartily sorry for her untimely fate. At the best I was only resigned. And then I come back to England, and find you married to a man who is utterly unsuited to you—"

"Major Gordon," exclaimed Cecil, "it is cowardly of you to talk to me like this, when you know that I am powerless to answer you. Do you wish me to get up and go away in order to escape from you?"

All this was said in a half-whisper, amidst the crash of the orchestra.

"Cecil, I have a right to speak to you,—the right of the wrong you have done me. My life was in your hands that day at Fortinbras. If you had loved me, surely you would have helped me to escape from the tie that had become so

painful to me. A word from you that day would have saved me. I should have written honestly to my poor girl, telling her all the truth; and I know she was too generous to have withheld my release. But you did not love me, and you sent me back to India to do my duty. It is very easy for a woman who does not know what love is to preach eloquently about honour and duty—".

"Major Gordon!"

"If you had loved me, you would not have married so soon after I left England. If you had loved me, you would have been true to my memory a little longer."

"It is you who are cruel," cried Cecil.

She turned to look at him as she spoke—she had been looking towards the stage before, with her face hidden from him—and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"Cecil," he exclaimed passionately, "you have been crying. Tell me that you loved me that day; confess that you love me, and I will never torment you again; only tell me that you

love me, and I will go away to Japan. You shall never see my face again."

"You know that I love you."

The curtain fell upon Valentine's passionate despair; and there were passion and despair elsewhere than on the mimic scene. Cecil rose suddenly and wrapped her opera-cloak round her.

"Will you send some one to fetch my carriage, Major Gordon?" she said.

"You are not going away, Cecil?" cried Flo; "there is the party at Mrs. Hetherington's, you know. You promised to go with me."

"I can't go any where else to-night, dear. The heat and the music have made my head ache."

"That's the worst of Meyerbeer. He's delightful, but he is very apt to make one's head ache. If there could be a fault in an orchestra of Costa's, I should think there were too many trombones in the orchestra to-night. And you really can't go to Mrs. Hetherington's?—You may order my carriage too, if you please, Sir Nugent: I sha'n't stop for the last act."

The two ladies left the theatre together, es-

corted by Sir Nugent and the Major. It was Hector who handed Cecil into her brougham; and in bidding her good-night he bent his head over the carriage-window and kissed the gloved hand resting in his.

"God bless you!" he said; "God bless you, and good-bye!"

She saw him standing under the portico with uncovered head as her carriage drove away; and she thought that she had heard his voice and seen his face for the last time.

"How can I ever go home?" she said to herself; "how can I ever go home and look into my husband's face after what I have listened to to-night?"

And then she began to wonder if it could indeed be that she had fallen into the dreadful list of false and wicked wives, whose lives are foul secrets to be hidden from the eyes of unsuspecting husbands. She remembered the women whom she had met in society; the women whose sins were suspected but not discovered; the women about and around whom there hovered an impalpable

cloud, but who faced the world boldly notwithstanding, secure in the strength of their beauty, or rank, or wit, and defiant of mankind.

Lady Cecil had met such women, and had contemplated them with that morbid curiosity which all social mysteries inspire. But to-night she thought of them with a shuddering horror.

"Shall I ever be ranked among them?" she asked herself; "or can I hold myself any better than them henceforward? I have let a man talk to me of his love; I have confessed my own mad folly. But he will go away—thank God for that! —he will go away; and I will try to forget all the folly and wickedness of this year."

She sat back in a corner of her carriage with her hands clasped upon her knees. Could there be a stranger picture than this—of a woman seated in her brougham in all her fashionable finery, praying for strength to escape sin? Even as she prayed, the thought that Hector Gordon was indeed going to leave England filled her soul with a dull despair. She was never to see him any more. The sweet intoxication of the bright summer-time

had come to an end; the brief dream had been succeeded by all the bitterness of the awakening.

"Why should he have spoken to me as he did to-night?" she thought: "we were so happy,—and if our happiness was sinful, I was unconscious of the sin. After to-night I can never look upon his face or hear his voice again without deliberate treachery to my husband."

During the week succeeding this evening at the Opera, Lady Cecil withdrew herself entirely from that frivolous circle in which Mrs. Lobyer reigned supreme. It was in vain that the devoted Florence sent one of the matched footmen to Brunswick Square in a hansom day after day with little perfumed notes of entreaty or reproach. Cecil withdrew herself into her dingy back drawing-room as into a fortress, and declined to yield to the advances of the enemy. She pleaded nervous headache, and a general disinclination for society; and she implored Mrs. Lobyer not to come to see her, as rest was all she wanted.

"In a few days I have no doubt I shall be

able to come to you, dear. In the mean time do not trouble yourself about me. I know how many engagements you have, and I beg you to attend to them without thought of me," she wrote, while the matched footman waited in the hall, and wondered at the manners and customs of the faithful Pupkin.

"Such fellers hadn't ought to be allowed to live," said the superb creature, in the confidential converse of the servants' hall; "which I sawr him, while she kep' me waitin' for her note, washin' the glasses in a little hole of a place over the ketching leads. And there was boots on a manogany slab waitin' to be took upstairs, which it's my belief he'd cleaned 'em with his own hands. While there's seeh fellers as that in the world, you can't wonder if a man gits called a dam lazy beggar for spendin' a quiet hour over his noospaper."

Hector Gordon called twice during the week after that performance of the *Huguenots* at which he and Cecil had assisted; but the barrister's wife was denied to him on both occasions. There

was a little scrawl in pencil on the card which he left for her on the first visit. "My regiment leaves on Wednesday. *Il faut que je te voie.*" The inestimable Pupkin brought the card on a salver and handed it solemnly to his mistress. It seemed to her as if he had presented her with a scorpion. She tore the flimsy pasteboard into half-a-dozen fragments, and threw them under the empty grate directly the door had closed upon the servant.

"He has no right to call here—he has no right to send me messages," she thought indignantly. And yet those two brief sentences, "My regiment leaves on Wednesday—*Il faut que je te voie,*" repeated themselves perpetually in her brain, like the scrap of a verse which sometimes haunts one with absurd persistence.

On Tuesday Major Gordon called again, and again left a card with a pencil-scrawl for the mistress of the house; and another card for the barrister, with P. P. C. in the corner.

"*Tu es bien cruelle,*" he had written on the card intended for Cecil; and again Pupkin

handed her the scorpion with all due solemnity —although with by no means the cleanest of hands, having left his blacking-brushes to attend the street-door.

The pencil-scrawl and the "*tu*" seemed to Cecil a supreme impertinence; but when a woman has confessed to a man that she loves him, he is apt to fancy himself privileged to employ that tender pronoun. Lady Cecil destroyed this card as she had destroyed the first; but she kissed the fragments before she cast them into the grate. She had reached that stage in folly—or perhaps in wickedness—when a woman's soul oscillates like a pendulum between right and wrong.

Mr. O'Boyneville espied the Major's card in the basket, as he took his tea.

"Ah, by the bye, I saw by the *Gazette* that your cousin's regiment had the rout for Japan," he exclaimed as he examined the slim morsel of pasteboard; "the Plungers haven't had much of a holiday after their Indian exploits. And Gordon hasn't dined with us once, after all. I suppose he has all the confounded impudence of your thorough-

bred military swell, and would consider he sacrificed himself if he came to such a house as this."

The next day was wet and dismal. A wet summer day is the most depressing of all days. Doleful organs alternated selections from the *Trovatore* with the "Old Hundredth," "Home, sweet home," and "I'm leaving thee in sorrow, Annie" —with a dreadful emphasis upon the Annie—below the windows of Brunswick Square, as Cecil sat in her drawing-room trying to occupy herself; trying not to think of the transport vessel which was to leave Southampton that day; trying not to remember that it was just possible Hector Gordon might make one last effort to see her before he left England.

If he had called in Brunswick Square that day, Cecil would have resolutely refused to see him; and yet as the day wore on, a dreary feeling took possession of her, which was something like the sense of disappointment. The inevitable dinner-hour, the inevitable evening, the disjointed scraps of information out of the *Times* newspaper, the joke that had convulsed a Westminster

audience in the morning, but which sounded so flat and vapid when recorded in the evening—all the petty commonplaces which composed the dull routine of her married life—seemed utterly intolerable to Cecil to-day. She had lived too much with the butterflies of late; she had feasted on the intoxicating perfumes of the rose-garden; and coming back to the hive of the working bee, it was scarcely strange if she found his dwelling dreary and darksome.

The day came to an end; the hopeless rain always pattering on the pavements of the square; the organ-man always droning his "*Ah che la morte*" somewhere or other within hearing. Mr. O'Boyneville came home to his substantial commonplace dinner, and his after-dinner sleep; and sitting under the dining-room lamp, with an unread novel lying open in her lap, Cecil thought of the transport vessel which by this time must have left Southampton Water and the green shores of the Wight behind her.

"Thank God he is gone!" she thought; "can I ever be thankful enough for that?"

CHAPTER V.

A MODERN LOVE-CHASE.

Mr. O'Boyneville was to leave London for his circuit-work a week after the departure of the 11th Plungers; and again there was a discussion as to the disposal of Cecil's life during his absence. This time she placed herself entirely in her husband's hands.

"Perhaps you are right," she said; "and it is better for me not to stay in town while you are away."

"Will you go to the Mountjoys'? you know how often Mrs. Mountjoy has asked you. I'm sure she'd be pleased if you went."

"I think I would rather go to some little watering-place, where I could have quiet and rest."

"Rest! Ah, to be sure. I daresay you want

rest. You have been going about a good deal this year, and I suppose that sort of thing tires even a woman in the long-run. For my own part, I have always found one evening-party worse than a week's work; but I'm not a party-going man. You shall go to Scarborough, if you like; and I'll try to spend an occasional Sunday with you. I can get across from Manchester and Liverpool."

"I should like that very much."

"Then it shall be so."

But it was not so; for a little note came from Mrs. Lobyer in the course of the morning to say that that lady was coming to dine in the evening, unless her heartless Cecil told her she was not to come.

"I know you are at home," wrote the lively Florence; "and I know your nervous headache is only an excuse for shutting your doors upon me. So I shall make a desperate attempt to force the citadel."

Cecil had no motive for excluding her friend. There was only one person whom she had wished to avoid, and that person had now left England.

"Come to us by all means, dearest Flo," she wrote, "if you don't mind a dull evening."

So at half-past six Florence's unapproachable chestnuts pawed the macadam of Bloomsbury, and the barrister's dinner was enlivened by that young lady's vivacious chatter.

"I have come to make a petition," she said; "and it is to you I shall address myself, Mr. O'Boyneville. I have grown heartily tired of London within this last week or two. I think the Ascot week is the season's apogee, and after that every thing begins to fade. There are to be cheap nights at the Opera next week, and how can any decent person stay in town when there are cheap nights at the Opera? So I am going to rush off to Pevenshall the day after to-morrow, and I want Cecil to go with me. I know your circuit-work begins next week, Mr. O'Boyneville; and I don't intend to accept a refusal. You can come to us from some of your Northern towns whenever you please; and we shall always be glad to have a flying visit."

It was in vain that Cecil told her friend of

the plan that had already been made for Scarborough. Mrs. Lobyer pooh-poohed Scarborough. Cecil urged her desire for perfect rest and quiet; but Mrs. Lobyer declared that Pevenshall would be a perfect hermitage during the month of July.

"None of my people are coming till the twelfth of August," she said. "It is impossible to beguile a decent man into the country till there is something for him to shoot. Sir Nugent is yachting in some uncivilised Northern region, and Grace Evershed is going to Switzerland with her father. Mr. Wilmot—that young clubbish man, you know, who played so well in our comedy—is going on a walking expedition in Brittany; and in fact every body worth having is engaged between this and September. So, if you want quiet, Cecil, you shall have plenty of it at Pevenshall. I have secured the dearest and deafest of matrons to play propriety—a delightful old creature who doses in a snug corner half the day, and deludes herself with the belief that she is doing Berlin-wool work—so we can live our own lives, and enjoy ourselves thoroughly. I am

going to try and do something for the good of my fellow-creatures this year; and I shall want your advice about some schools I wish to establish, and some cottages I mean to build near Pevenshall."

Mrs. Lobyer was in the habit of pleading as earnestly as a spoiled child for the gratification of her wishes, and on this occasion, as on almost every other, she contrived to have her own way. It was arranged that Cecil should go to Pevenshall, and that she and Flo should travel together.

Cecil was busy with her packing next day, when a card was put into her hand, and she was told that a gentleman was waiting for her in the drawing-room.

"A gentleman for me?" she said, without looking at the card.

"Yes, my lady. The same gentleman who called twice before, Pupkin says."

Cecil looked at the card, and saw that it was Hector Gordon's; but over the inscription in the

corner—11th Plungers—the words "late of" were written in pencil.

"I cannot see Major Gordon," said Cecil. "Tell Pupkin to say that I am particularly engaged."

The servant stared, but obeyed. When the door had closed upon her, Cecil sat with the card in her hand, staring blankly at that half-written, half-printed sentence, "late of the 11th Plungers."

"He has not gone," she said to herself; "and he has left his regiment. What does it all mean?"

Something like actual fear took possession of her as she thought that Hector Gordon was in England—near her—ready at any moment to intrude his presence upon her.

"He has betrayed me," she said; "he made me believe that he was going away, on purpose to extort my secret from me. And now he will come, and come, and come, until at last he forces me to see him; and then—! Nothing but misery can come of our meeting; nothing but wretchedness and remorse."

And then her mind went back to that subject of which she had thought as she drove home from the Opera. The images of women whom she knew and had known arose before her; the women who hovered on the border-land between the Eden of respectability and the region of outer darkness far away. She began to understand the stories of many of these women; the stories which had been such dark enigmas for her until to-day.

"They have been like me, perhaps," she thought; "they have believed in their own strength of mind, their own honour; and all at once they have sunk into a degradation as deep as mine. And my husband leaves me to my fate: to take my own course, without help or care from him. I doubt if he remembers my existence, except when I am with him; and I know he is often unconscious of my presence even when I am sitting by his side."

For the first time in her life, Cecil felt a sense of resentment as she thought of her husband's indifference. He was kind, he was generous. She tried to remember this, and to be grateful;

but to-day she could remember only his indifference. She had long ago reconciled herself to the idea that he loved his profession better than he loved his wife; but to-day she was angry with him for the unflattering preference, and argued that he must love his wife very little if the dry-as-dust work of the law-courts could be dearer to him than she was. To-day for the first time she was angry with him for not loving her better; for to-day she felt herself in supreme need of his love.

She went on with her packing, mechanically enough; but still the work was done. The housemaid, who assisted in the process, thought her mistress just a little paler and a little quieter than usual; and was rather inclined to wonder about that military gentleman who had called three times, and had been refused admittance every time; and who, according to Pupkin, was such a splendid and gracious creature.

"He's never been here except those three times," thought the housemaid. "Perhaps she knew him before she was married to master, pore thing!"

When the packing was finished, Cecil ordered her brougham, and drove to Dorset Square. She was feverishly anxious to know the meaning of those two words—"late of"—on Hector Gordon's card. She found her aunt at home, but that lady could throw no light upon the mystery.

"I fully thought he had sailed for Japan in the Satrap," said the dowager. "He came to bid me good-bye a week ago; and he didn't say a word then about the probability of his exchanging or selling out. *I* don't read the *Military Gazette*. He might have called upon *me*, I think, to tell me the change in his plans; but he has been very mysterious in his manners of late. Perhaps he has seen some one who is to be the second Mrs. Gordon. Those young men with too much money and nothing to do are always falling in love."

Cecil could obtain no more than this from the dowager. She bade her aunt good-bye, and went back to Brunswick Square, where she received a little note from Mr. O'Boyneville, announcing that he found himself suddenly compelled to dine

at Blackwall with Sleghammer and two or three others. So she was left alone all the evening, too preoccupied to read, and with nothing to do but to sit in the summer twilight listening to the fifes and drums in the quadrangle of the Foundling, and the ebb and flow of hansom cabs.

The train by which Mrs. Lobyer was to travel left the Euston Station at ten o'clock. There had been some talk of Mr. Lobyer accompanying his wife; but on the eve of the journey that gentleman announced the necessity of his immediate departure for Rouen to complete some great cotton transaction, involving considerable strategy, and the mystification of the calico trade in general, for the enrichment of Lobyer and Co. in particular.

"It's a fluke," said the ardent young speculator; "and it's just one of those affairs in which half-an-hour on the right or the wrong side may make a difference of two or three thousand pounds. You can send what servants you like to Pevenshall; and if I am obliged to stop in town when I come back, I can use my club."

Cecil found Flo in the waiting-room with her maid in attendance, while one of the matched footmen stood on guard at the door, holding a box of books by a strap, and evidently suffering from an acute sense of ill-usage. This dignified person was employed to secure a carriage for the two ladies; and after ushering them to their seats, retired to a second-class compartment with the maid.

Of course it was the fastest of express trains. Such people as Mrs. Lobyer rarely consent to travel at less than sixty miles an hour. Whirling northwards across the bright green country with the lively Flo for her companion, Cecil felt as if she had been escaping from danger and unhappiness. Major Gordon might call again in Brunswick Square; but he would find her gone; and would abandon his persecution of her.

"It is persecution," she thought, "after the circumstances of that night at the Opera. He entrapped me into a confession, and he will be worse than a traitor if he uses my guilty weakness against me."

She tried to despise him for the dishonour; but even the dishonour was a sacrifice which he made to his love.

"My husband will not waste an hour from his profession for my sake," she thought; "and this man, who was once so true and honourable, is ready to sacrifice truth and honour for love of me."

She thought this—not in set phrases, as it is written here. But some such thought floated vaguely in her brain, as the express carried her towards Pevenshall.

The rooms Cecil had occupied in the winter had been made ready for her now, bright and gay with birds and flowers to-day, as they had been bright with lights and fire of old. Flo sent a useful young person, who did plain needlework and waited upon maidless visitors, to assist in her friend's unpacking; and aided by this young person, Cecil dressed for dinner, and found leisure to sit by the open window of her little sitting-room, looking out at the broad expanse of hill and valley that stretched beyond the gardens.

She was roused from her reverie by Mrs. Lobyer, who came tripping into the room with more than customary animation.

"I have come to tell you some good news," she said, perching herself upon the arm of Cecil's chair, like something frivolous and fashionable in the way of birds;—"that mauve-and-white grenadine becomes you admirably; and I like the sash worn across the shoulder that way—like the Queen's blue ribbon. What darling cameo earrings! If there is any thing in the world I adore, it is cameos."

"Is that your news, Flo?"

"O no; my news is something better than that. I was dying to tell you all the time we were travelling; but I was determined to reserve it for a *bonne bouche*. And now, shall I give it you in ten, shall I give it you in twenty, shall I give it you in one of Mr. Lobyer's billions? I have secured an eligible male visitor!"

Cecil shrugged her shoulders.

"I thought we were going to seclude ourselves from the world, in order to carry out some philanthropic schemes, Flo."

"O, the philanthropic schemes shall go on all the same: *ça ira!* But Pevenshall entirely given over to the curates of the neighbourhood, and two or three narrow-minded county squires, would have been insufferably dull. And then *this* gentleman is a friend of yours!"

"What gentleman?"

"Major Gordon. He has been wise enough to sell out just as his regiment was going to sail for Japan. He called on me yesterday, and I told him you were coming with me; and I made Mr. Lobyer ask him to come to us. He accepted the invitation immediately; and it was all arranged on the spot. This was before Mr. Lobyer knew that he would be obliged to go to Rouen; but if he had known that, I don't suppose it would have made much difference. I am blessed with the least jealous of husbands."

"Flo!"

"Is it wicked to say that? Mustn't I thank Providence for my blessings?"

"And Major Gordon is really coming!"

"Really and truly. He is here by this time,

I daresay. There is a fast train that leaves London at half-past twelve.—And now come and let me introduce you to my deaf darling, Mrs. Henniker. Why, child, you stand there with your eyes fixed as if you were in a trance!—and the second dinner-bell has rung. *Filons!*"

CHAPTER VI.

"HE COMES TOO NEAR, WHO COMES TO BE DENIED."

LADY CECIL stayed at Pevenshall. Her first thought on hearing that Hector Gordon was to be an inmate of the house had been to go straight back to London, without having so much as seen the man she dreaded. But a woman is very seldom free to follow her first thoughts. If a man wishes to escape from any given place at a moment's notice, he has only to declare himself called away on business, and lo! he is free to spring into the first hansom he encounters and start for the Antipodes, if he so pleases, without let or hindrance. But a woman cannot take an unexplained morning's walk without the dread of question and scandal. A few moments' reflection showed Cecil that escape from Pevenshall was a moral impossi-

bility. What motive could she allege for such a proceeding? How account to the impetuous Flo, who would press her closely for her reasons? How explain her return to London to her husband, whose wonder would be aroused by her caprice? And if once people began to wonder and to question, might they not arrive at the miserable truth? An overwhelming terror seized her on the discovery of her helplessness. She found herself hemmed in on every side, powerless to fly from the pursuer she dreaded, run to earth like some hunted animal; and with no resource but to stand at bay and defy the cruel hunter.

A strong-minded woman would perhaps have made light of the difficulties which surrounded the lawyer's wife. A real heroine would have bidden her hostess a hasty adieu, and left the danger-haunted mansion without explanation or delay. But Cecil was not strong-minded. She had lived all her life in the dread of those little social laws which a woman sometimes finds it more difficult to break than to violate the law of Heaven itself.

She gave up all idea of flight. There was only one course which seemed possible to her, and that was to make an *ad-misericordiam* appeal to Hector Gordon. A woman always hopes so much from the honour and generosity of a man—until she has made her appeal and discovered how frail a straw manly generosity may prove in the hour of peril.

So Cecil met Major Gordon in the drawing-room where the Pevenshall guests had assembled. The party consisted of the deaf matron, who had an aristocratic nose and a placid imbecility of countenance; the deaf matron's husband, who was a retired half-pay colonel, with a very red face, and that genius for gastronomy which seems the special faculty of the middle-aged warrior who has retired on his laurels; two stylish girls who had been schoolfellows of Flo's; and a brace of curates from the neighbourhood. It was a very small assembly compared to the brilliant gathering of the last winter; and the great drawing-room looked almost tenantless.

Cecil was very pale when she followed Florence

into the room. The first glance told her that the man she dreaded was present. He was standing by one of the open windows talking to Colonel Henniker, while the curates entertained the two young ladies with mild local gossip; during the progress of which the deaf matron assumed that amiable air of interest which a man who has forgotten the French he learned at some juvenile academy is apt to wear during the recital of some piquant Parisian anecdote.

Mrs. Lobyer conducted her friend straight to the placid matron. "My dear Mrs. Henniker, how shameful of me to be the last to come down, and on the first day too! But I had no idea it was so late. How kind of you and the dear Colonel to come to me at such a short notice! And how have you left every one in York? I looked for my Yorkshire friends in vain all the year. No one came to town except the Spaldings and the Apperleys. Let me introduce my friend Lady Cecil O'Boyneville. You were not with us last winter when she was here. And now I must go and welcome the Colonel and Major Gordon.

Take care, Lucy, Mr. Summerton is dreadfully High-Church. — How do you do, Laura? I'll come and talk to you presently," said the young matron to her sometime schoolfellows, as she tripped away.

Cecil plunged at once into a laborious conversation with Mrs. Henniker. How delightful the country was at this time of year! And how especially beautiful the scenery about Pevenshall! and so on. It was weary work, that stereotyped talk, while the sense of Hector Gordon's vicinity exercised a bewildering influence on her thoughts, and rendered the most commonplace conversation difficult. She was safe under shelter of the matron's wing, when Hector came presently to greet her. She would not see his outstretched hand, and received his greeting with freezing coldness. A desperate kind of courage possessed her in this extremity, and she determined all at once that she would humiliate herself by no *ad-misericordiam* appeal. She would compel him to leave Pevenshall. She would awaken him to the sense of his own dishonour. Brave and

defiant for the moment, she looked up at him with a proud steady glance, and silently challenged him with his baseness. He felt all the significance of that cold gaze, and his eyelids fell beneath it.

"I have followed you, you see, Lady Cecil," he said in a very low voice. She did not answer him, but turned to Mrs. Henniker and took up the thread of her vapid talk.

"No, I never was in York; and I am really most anxious to see the Minster. Papa used to say he thought it finer than Rouen Cathedral. But I cannot fancy any thing—" and so on, and so on.

Hector Gordon placed himself opposite the two ladies, and sat looking steadily at Cecil. She was conscious of that determined contemplation, but did not flinch beneath it. And she went on perseveringly with her disquisition upon the show-places and rural beauties of Yorkshire. Major Gordon was obliged to offer his arm to Mrs. Henniker presently, when dinner was announced; while the portly Colonel conducted his hostess, and Cecil

was relegated to the care of the High-Church curate.

All that evening and all the next day, and for many days and evenings to come, Cecil preserved the same frigid demeanour towards Hector Gordon; and yet he did not leave Pevenshall. Again and again he tried to obtain a few moments' confidential conversation, but on every occasion he found himself baffled and repulsed; and yet he did not leave Pevenshall. A silent duel was always going on between these two. The poor hunted victim was always on the defensive; the hunter was merciless. By every possible stratagem Cecil avoided the explanation she feared; but still the Major held his post obstinately, waiting for the chance which must come sooner or later.

It came at last, when Cecil had been some weeks at Pevenshall, and when the house was beginning to fill. The York Summer Meeting was close at hand. Mr. Lobyer had returned from Rouen triumphant, and was happy in the society of some of the choicer spirits of Manchester, re-

nowned for their achievements on the turf, and all full of their York engagements.

The Major's opportunity came at last. The nights were oppressively warm; and all visitors at Pevenshall under forty years of age were in the habit of abandoning the drawing-room soon after dinner for the broad terrace in front of the open windows. Here, in the delicious moonlight, the party broke up into pleasant groups to saunter up and down the broad walk, or to gather in a knot at some angle of the stone balustrade; and hence more adventurous spirits wandered away in twos and threes and fours to circulate among the winding pathways of the gardens, where the rarest specimens of the pine tribe imparted a spicy odour to the night air.

The windows of the billiard-room, as well as those of the drawing-room, opened on this delightful terrace: and a cluster of iron chairs in the neighbourhood of these windows marked the spot where Mr. Lobyer and his particular friends were wont to congregate, making a little constellation with the luminous ends of their

cigars. These summer evenings in the open air were very agreeable to the guests at Pevenshall, and the great clock in the quadrangle had generally struck twelve before the last of the strollers left the terrace. It was the place of places for flirtation; the place of places for that intimate converse which the French call *causerie*, and which is the next thing to flirtation. The eligible young men who had come down for the York Summer and the marriagable young ladies found a good deal to say to one another on these balmy moonlight nights; and appropriate couplets from Tennyson, Owen Meredith, and Alfred de Musset were at a premium. Byron and Moore are *rococo* nowadays; and the most sentimental of damsels would stare in amazement at an admirer who should quote the *Corsair* or *Lalla Rookh* for her entertainment.

Sir Nugent Evershed was still yachting; but Florence seemed very little affected by the absence of the chief of her worshippers. Other adorers flocked round her shrine, and she was content to receive their homage. To be admired

was the only art she knew; and a life spent in the perpetual excitement derivable from new millinery left little time for serious thought.

"I really believe I am the happiest creature in the world, Cecil," she said to the one friend whom she trusted with her secret thoughts; "for I am only unhappy when I think; and as I may almost say that I never think, it must follow that I am never unhappy."

It was while sauntering on the terrace with Cecil on one of the warmest of the July nights that Florence thus addressed her friend. They had wandered away from the rest of the party, who gathered chiefly about the lighted windows of the drawing-room, whence an extra chair, or a forgotten shawl, or a cup of tea, or a glass of water, or any one of the trifles that womankind is always demanding from attendant man, could be fetched at a moment's notice; and where some one was always found willing to sing or play for the edification of the loungers outside the windows.

Cecil and Florence had been walking up and down the deserted end of the terrace for some

time, when the voice of Mr. Lobyer, bawling "Flo, Flo! come here; I want to speak to you," was heard from the distance; and Cecil's companion hurried away to attend the bidding of her lord and master.

Cecil was not sorry to find herself alone. Her life at Pevenshall since the hour of her arrival had been one perpetual excitement. The silent battle for ever being fought against the man who loved her, and whose love had shown itself more pitiless than another man's hate, was not without its agony. The helpless wild creature brought to bay, and facing its hunter in the desperation of bitter despair, must suffer anguish something akin to that which Cecil had endured in the daily companionship of the lover she feared.

She feared him. In vain she called upon her womanly pride to help her; in vain she supplicated better and surer help from that Heaven her sin offended, even while she prayed. Day by day she fought her battle bravely; but a dim consciousness of coming danger perpetually oppressed her. The old simile of the precipice is the only

comparison which fits the state of her mind. She felt like a creature walking in outer darkness near the verge of an abyss. She felt herself near the horrible danger. It was not inevitable that she should fall over the precipice, but the precipice was always there—always hidden by the thick darkness, and at any moment her ignorant footsteps might stray too near the fatal boundary. Thinking of that day of temptation and trial at Fortinbras, and all that had occurred since then,—the young wife's untimely death, the return of Hector's regiment, the chance that had brought him to Pevenshall,—Cecil was inclined to yield to the weakest theory ever propounded by an invisible Satan for the corruption of womankind. The old classic machinery, the work of the Eumenides, seemed to have had part in all this story of unhappy love. Hector Gordon's return to England was Agamemnon's return over again,—only this time the hero returned to destroy rather than to be destroyed; and it was the heroine for whom the fatal net was spread. Surely, when beguiling Eve to her ruin, the Miltonic Satan must amongst

other arguments have urged that the Fates had ordained her disobedience, and that she was predestined to taste the forbidden fruit. A weak-minded woman is always ready to mistake the action of a man's selfish obstinacy for the handiwork of the Fates.

To-night Cecil fancied herself abandoned to the Eumenides; for, a few minutes after Mrs. Lobyer had quitted her, a dark figure came between her and the moonlight; and looking up, she recognised Hector Gordon.

"At last, Cecil!" he said.

She had been walking away from the animated assembly outside the drawing-room windows, but at sight of her persecutor she turned abruptly. He laid his hand upon her arm to stop her.

"I must speak to you, Cecil," he said. "You have avoided me as if I were a pestilence ever since I came to this house; but do you think I am likely to submit to be avoided, after the sacrifice I have made in order to come here?"

"The sacrifice! what sacrifice?" cried Cecil.

The barrier fell, and the foe rushed to his

triumph. Cecil's only chance of defending the citadel had lain in a steady refusal to hold parley with the enemy. Entrapped into a conference, her best strength abandoned her.

"Is it possible that you do not know how much I have sacrificed in order to be here by your side to-night? O Cecil, there is a meanness in this affectation of ignorance. I have sacrificed my career—my position as a soldier—for your sake. Do you know what it is for a man to sell out of his regiment on the eve of a perilous service? If it were not for what I have done in India, I might be branded as a coward. As it is, in spite of what I did out there, there are men who will hint the possibility of my cowardice. You don't know, perhaps, how dear a soldier's career is to him. And yet, by the way men court dangerous service, you must know how much dearer reputation is to them than life."

"Why were you so foolish—so mad, as to remain in England?"

"Because I love you."

"You had no right to remain. Do you re-

member what you said to me that night? You were going away: we might never see each other again. After that you were bound in honour to go."

"I know that. But I could not go—after—"

He paused for a moment, and then said in a lower voice, "After what I heard that night."

"I wish I had died before that night!" cried Cecil passionately. She felt the darkness growing thicker round her, her feet wandering nearer to the precipice—and she was powerless; as powerless as a dreamer fighting with shadows.

"It is my fate to be wicked and miserable," she thought.

"I wish *I* had died before that night!" repeated Hector Gordon. "I wish I had died in India, or at Fortinbras. O Cecil, you claim a right to blame me! It is I who have a right to reproach you for your coldness that day. One word and we should have been so happy: not for a moment only—and there are some moments of happiness worth a commonplace lifetime—but for all our lives,—innocently, serenely happy. It

wanted only one word from you, Cecil,—only one little word."

"I tried to do my duty. And yet—I loved you so dearly!"

The words were spoken unconsciously. She was thinking of that painful struggle between love and duty, and of the useless victory which she had gained. Utterly useless, since the battle had to be fought over again.

"No, no, Cecil! I cannot believe that you loved me," cried the soldier, seizing the slender hand which struggled in vain to free itself; "you could not have been so cruel if you had loved me."

They had walked away from the lights and the crowd, and were standing at the end of the terrace, where there were vases full of flowers on the broad balustrade, and a life-size marble figure of Pomona, which cast its shadow over them as they stood looking down at the sloping landscape, sublimely beautiful in the moonlight.

The sense of her own dishonour, and of the dishonour of the man who loved her, was para-

mount in Cecil's mind; and yet she let him talk to her. That feeling of perfect helplessness which holds the dreamer in its spell possessed her as she stood by her lover's side in the dreamlike light and shadow of the summer night.

"I have not been altogether base," pleaded Hector. "I spoke the truth that night at the Opera when I told you that I was going to leave England. It was not till some days after, that I resolved to sell out. I should have held to my purpose—I firmly believe I should have left England—if you had not so obstinately refused to see me when I called in Brunswick Square. I think an interview with you would have given me strength, Cecil; and I should have gone out yonder resigned to the misery of our separation."

"You had no right to try to see me after that night. You call me cruel;—what could be more cruel or dishonourable than your conduct to me? You persecute me in my own house; you follow me here, where I am powerless to escape from you. Is this the conduct of a gentleman, Major Gordon?"

"It is the conduct of a man who is ready to trample reputation, honour, every thing under his feet in order to be near the woman he loves. But how can I expect you to understand all this? You have never loved me. If you had loved me, you could not have married O'Boyneville."

"I have married a man who is more than worthy of my affection and gratitude."

"Yes; and who is about as capable of appreciating you as Mr. Lobyer is capable of understanding that Leonardo da Vinci which he brought from Rome."

"Major Gordon, I will not allow you to speak so of my husband. If you cannot respect him as I respect him, it is better that his name should never be mentioned between us."

"Much better; for I cannot speak of him with patience. Can you imagine what I felt, Cecil, when I received my aunt's letter announcing your marriage? I had married another woman, —loving you, and you only, all the time—because you had decided that I was bound to keep my promise. I kept my word to my poor true-hearted

girl at the cost of my happiness. But you, Cecil, you were bound by no old contract; and yet, within so short a time of our parting, all memory of my love was blotted from your mind, and you were ready to marry this O'Boyneville!"

"All memory of the past was not blotted from my mind. I had tried to forget, honestly and truly, but I know now to my cost that I never really forgot that time at Fortinbras. O Major Gordon, why do you force me to say these things? I hate myself for listening to you; I hate myself for talking to you. You could never understand why I married Mr. O'Boyneville. You could never imagine the weariness of my life and my bitter need of some friend and protector. My chief unhappiness arises from the fact that my husband's profession will not allow him to be the friend I hoped he would be; and you know this. You know how lonely I am, and you take advantage of my defencelessness. It is cruel and unmanly, Major Gordon."

She lost all self-command as she said this, and burst into tears; whereupon Hector humiliated

himself to the very dust, imploring her forgiveness, and declaring that he would leave Pevenshall—he would tear himself from her for ever and ever, rather than he would inflict pain upon the woman he loved so dearly. And then came those perilous promises which a man is apt to make on such occasions. He implored her to trust him. What was there in all the world so precious to him as her happiness? He confessed his own guilt. He had been reckless, heedless of every thing, in his passionate desire to see her once more, to speak to her once again; and now that he had spoken, he would be content. He would go away resigned to the idea of their eternal separation.

Cecil dried her tears during these protestations.

"I wish to believe in your sincerity," she said; "but there is no occasion for you to leave Pevenshall; I shall go back to town to-morrow morning. Good-night!"

"You are going in at once?"

"Yes; I am very tired."

"Let me take you back to the house, at least."

"No, thanks; I would rather go by myself."

She walked away, leaving him leaning against the balustrade under the shadow of the marble Pomona. This time she believed the battle had been won; but there was a keen sense of shame mingled with the triumph of victory. She contrived to reach her own rooms without encountering any one, and packed every thing ready for her departure before going to bed. She announced her intention to Mrs. Lobyer before breakfast the next morning, and encountered the opposition which she had expected from that lady.

"You must stay for the York Summer," Flo said decisively; "Sir Nugent Evershed's horses are to run, and he and all his set will be there in full force. Grace is coming home from Switzerland, and is to give me a week immediately; and you know you like Grace."

"I like her very much, and I am very sorry to leave you, Flo; but I must go."

"Why must? Give me an adequate reason, and you shall be worried no more; but I must have a reason."

"Mr. O'Boyneville wishes me to return."

"Has he written to tell you so?"

"Yes."

It was the first deliberate falsehood Cecil had ever told, and she blushed as she uttered it.

"But I thought he was on circuit?"

"His circuit-work is just over."

"O, very well, Cecil; if your duty as a wife compels you to depart, I suppose I must submit. But I am so sorry to lose you."

"And I am sorry to leave you, dear. There is a train leaves Chiverley at three; I thought of going by that."

"Then we will take an early luncheon, and I will drive you to the station.—Good morning, Major Gordon," cried Mrs. Lobyer as that gentleman entered the room; "here is Lady Cecil going to run away from us just as our party is beginning to be pleasant. Don't you think she is very unkind?"

"I think there can scarcely be any real reason for Lady Cecil's departure," answered the Major; "a lady is always mistress of her time. It is

another matter with us. I find by my letters of this morning that I shall be obliged to leave Pevenshall in a day or two. I need scarcely say how much I shall regret going away."

"There now!" cried Flo; "that is always my fate. If one nice person goes away, other nice people begin to take fright directly. You army men find that desertion is infectious, I believe, Major Gordon."

Cecil spent the morning in her own rooms under pretence of making preparations for departure that had been made overnight. She was feverishly anxious to be away from Pevenshall: and she went down to luncheon in her travelling dress.

"The ponies are to be ready at half-past one," said Flo; "and one of the men has taken your luggage already in a cart. You see I am heroic enough to speed the parting guest when I am told departure is inevitable. Major Gordon, will you give Lady Cecil one of those cutlets?"

Cecil declined any thing so substantial as a cutlet; but took two or three sips from a glass of

pale sherry, for the satisfaction of her hostess. In her eagerness to escape from the house that sheltered Hector Gordon she felt an unreasoning dread of some hindrance to her departure. Her eyes wandered to the clock on the chimney-piece every now and then, while Flo was absent preparing for the drive; and it was with difficulty that she went through the ordeal of bidding adieu to Mrs. Lobyer's guests, who were all "so sorry" to find she was really going, and "so anxious" to meet her again before long. "Though I'm sure we can never meet in such a pleasant house as this," said a genial widow, who appreciated the liberty and luxury of Mr. Lobyer's mansion.

Flo came back to the dining-room at last, equipped for the drive; and every body left the table to bid a last good-bye to Lady Cecil. The two ladies went out together with a posse of people following them; and in the hall they encountered a stalwart gentleman who had just alighted from a lumbering fly, and who pounced upon Cecil and kissed her before the assembled multitude.

"I have not forgotten your hearty invitation, you see, Mrs. Lobyer," said the stalwart gentleman, who was no other than the great O'Boyneville. "My circuit-work has been rather lighter than usual this year, and I have come over from Carlisle to spend a few days at Pevensball."

"I am so glad," cried Flo. "And that letter?"

"What letter?"

"The letter asking Cecil to go back to town."

"I wrote no letter asking Cecil to go back to town."

"O Cecil!" said Mrs. Lobyer, "I am sorry you were so tired of us all."

Cecil blushed crimson, and cast an imploring look at her friend, who stared at her in supreme mystification.

"I suppose I may send away the pony-carriage," said Flo; "you will not think any more of leaving us."

"Not till Mr. O'Boyneville goes."

"And that will not be till after the races, I hope."

"I will stay for the races—I will stay for any diversion you please to offer me, Mrs. Lobyer," cried the barrister cheerily. "I am my own man for the next six weeks, and your devoted slave. What a delightful place this is in summer; and what scenery!—Ah, Gordon, how do you do? I thought you were off to Japan."

He seemed bigger and more boisterous than usual, Cecil thought, as she went back with him to the dining-room, where the interrupted luncheon began again, and where Mr. O'Boyneville entertained the company with some delightful anecdotes of the provincial law-courts. So Lady Cecil stayed at Pevenshall, trusting that Hector Gordon would keep his promise and depart immediately.

CHAPTER VII.

"WERE ALL THY LETTERS SUNS, I COULD NOT SEE."

WHILE the butterflies of fashion enjoyed the bright summer time, and brazen bands brayed their loudest in horticultural gardens, and foreign glee-singers carolled in every imaginable European language at morning concerts and lawn parties, William Crawford shut himself in his painting-room, and worked as he had never worked since the old days in Buckingham Street, when the world had yet to learn that there was a painter called Crawford.

He had nothing left him now but his art. He reminded himself of that fact very often as he stood before his easel in the balmy summer weather, while suburban butterflies wheeled above his roses, and a suburban bee boomed and bounced

against the old stained-glass in his bay window. Time had been when the painter had found his art more than sufficient for his life, and when his chief regret had been that life was not long enough for art. But the elegant siren of the Hermitage had disturbed the even current of his existence; and it was in vain that he tried to coax the stream back into its old course.

"I begin to think that I shall never paint another picture," he said to himself, after abandoning more than one design in despair. "I make sketch after sketch, but my ideas lose their freshness before I am ready to begin upon my large canvas. Have I lost my love for my art, in loving her? or what is this restless, feverish uncertainty which takes the power out of my hand? I will not be the slave of this folly. I have outlived bitterer sorrows than the loss of Mrs. Champernowne's society. I lived down the trouble of my young wife's death; I survived ten years of perpetual failure and disappointment; and am I to succumb at the very last because a woman is selfish and heartless? No; I *will* forget

Georgina Champernowne; I *will* paint a better picture than I have ever painted yet."

After arriving at this resolution, Mr. Crawford abandoned his brushes and palette for one entire day, and shut himself in his library. He took down his favourite volumes,—the sweet familiar stories of the Greek fairyland; and all the lovely images which had made the brightest dreams of his inspired boyhood came back to him, and floated around him once more, in spite of Mrs. Champernowne. His Psyche's enchanting face bent over him as he sat dreaming in the drowsy summer noon; his Cupid peered at him in all the godlike beauty of immortal youth; and innumerable nymphs, innumerable sirens filled the room with their aërial loveliness.

He went back to his painting-room the next morning with new enthusiasm, and with all the details of his picture fully developed in his mind.

"Come, my divinity," he cried; "come, my bright incarnation of the immortal soul, and put to flight all earthly follies by your divine presence. As I am a man and a painter, I will forget you,

Mrs. Champernowne; and my new picture shall plant me a round higher on the glorious ladder."

From the beginning of May to the end of July William Crawford worked incessantly at the large canvas which he had set up for himself in his despair. No hand but his own had any part in the work; for he was possessed with a feverish delight in his labour which he had never, even in his most industrious days, felt before. He worked all through the long summer days, by good lights and bad lights; entering his painting-room at eight o'clock in the morning, rarely to leave it till seven in the evening. He took his hasty meals in that tapestried chamber, amongst the black oak cabinets and trailing draperies.

The servants at the Fountains remarked the change in their master's habits, and talked gravely of his haggard face and restless impatient manner.

"He used to be the best of tempers," said the painter's man-of-all-work; "but now it's as much as you can do to open your mouth without getting your nose snapped off, which the young person that comes to sit for his Fishky says his tempers

about her attitoods is somethink offul, and that he's got no more consideration for her elbow-joints than if she was his wooden dummy; which I'm sure, up to two or three months back, there wasn't a pleasanter gentleman or a better master than Mr. Crawford."

It is good for a mortal to be reminded of his mortality at that moment when his yearnings towards a brighter universe have lifted him away from this dull earth, and are wafting him towards that serener region in which dwell the perfect images of his fancy. There are limits beyond which no man can go; and during the last three months of his life William Crawford had been trying to overstep those limits. In the hope of forgetting the woman he loved, he had thrown himself into his work with a burning eagerness for success that was dangerous to him alike as a man and an artist.

"If other men work six hours a day, I will work twelve," he thought. "I have nothing to live for now but my work."

This was the refrain of his life nowadays.

What had he to live for but his art? and if he did not do great things in that, what purpose was there left for his existence?

The subject of his new picture was only another chapter in his favourite fable—the story of Psyche. She lay asleep under a tent, with the young god by her side, sleeping like herself, divinely innocent in the unconsciousness of slumber. A crowd of Zephyrs, holding one another by the hand, have come to peep at the sleeping lovers. They float on a wandering ray of moonlight, they hover in aërial circles about the lovely sleepers. Never had William Crawford achieved a greater triumph than in the creation of these ethereal beings, transparent as water-drops against a moonlit sky, with sweet arch faces and gauzy wings. And the slumbering Psyche, with her fair infantine face, and her veil of pale golden hair; and the divine moonlight, and the mysterious depths of cool shadow,—every detail of the picture was a triumph; and as the work neared its completion the painter began to feel that he had at least surpassed himself.

"When Sheridan was slow to write a new comedy, they said he was afraid of the author of the *School for Scandal.* And people have declared that I should never equal the painter of the 'Aspasia;' but I think I have beaten the Aspasia at last," mused Mr. Crawford as he stood before his easel, and pondered on the aërial charms of his Zephyrs.

He had worked by bad lights and good lights—in sunshine and shadow. He had grappled with and mastered the difficulties to which he had been wont to succumb. Not content with doubling the daily hours of his labour, he had worked at his background at night. There had been no reason for his abnormal industry except his own restlessness; but that restlessness was unconquerable. The intoxication of success took possession of him, and he allowed himself neither pause nor respite.

There came a time when under any other phase of circumstances he would have laid down his palette and left his painting-room. There came a time when he felt that his sight was beginning to suffer from unwonted use; but still he went on.

"I can rest as long as I like when my Zephyrs are finished," he said to himself. "If I were to leave my picture, I might lose the freshness of my ideas; I might even take a disgust for my lovely Psyche."

So the painter held on steadily, in spite of a curious languor which made his eyelids heavy, and an occasional visitation from a strange throbbing pain above his eyebrows. He went on; promising himself a consultation with some distinguished oculist, and a long rest, when his "Psyche and the Zephyrs" was finished. He continued his work with unrelenting industry, indomitable determination; but there were moments in which the beautiful faces upon his canvas disappeared suddenly behind a dazzling mist, until he was fain to lay down his brushes and walk up and down the room for a little while with his hands before his tired eyes.

It was the middle of August, and the picture wanted little more than a week's work for its completion, when the painter yielded for the first time to that languid feeling in the eyelids,

and abandoned his work in order to indulge in a brief siesta. All the clocks of Kensington had just struck three, and the vibration of the different chimes came floating across the painter's garden. It was an almost insupportable summer day—sultry and oppressive—the day of all others on which the hardest worker is apt to be seized with a distaste for his labour.

"It's no use," said Mr. Crawford, as he gave a last look at his canvas; "I can scarcely see the colours I am using. I can't stand against this drowsiness any longer."

He threw himself upon a sofa, a noble couch of strictly classic form, upon which had erst reclined Aspasia the wise and beautiful, or at any rate the dark-haired model who had sat for the Grecian beauty; that maligned enchantress who sinned against poetry by descending from a Pericles to a cattle-dealer. The painter fell asleep almost immediately; but for some time after he had lain down he had a dim consciousness of pain above his eyebrows. By and by, however, the slumber grew deeper; he no longer heard the bees humming in

his roses, the subdued roll of distant wheels. He fell into a long dreamless sleep, from which he awoke at last very suddenly, with a feeling that he had slept for many hours.

He had slept for a very long time as it seemed, for it was quite dark when he awoke.

"No more work to-day," he thought with a sigh. "I counted on getting an hour between five and six. Why hasn't Dimond lighted my lamps?"

The painter groped his way to the bell and rang violently.

"What a night!" he muttered; "there must be a storm brewing. I haven't known it as dark as this all the summer."

He stood by the mantelpiece waiting. The window was opposite him, and he felt the warm summer air floating in upon him where he stood. But he could not even define the broad opening of the window through the profound darkness.

"Lights, Dimond," he said impatiently, as the man opened the door.

"Lights, sir?"

"Yes; of course. Why have you left the

lamps till this time? Why isn't that passage lighted?"

"But it's so early, sir—not much after five—and such a bright afternoon. I didn't think you'd like me to light the gas yet awhile."

"Not much after five o'clock!" repeated the painter in a tone of utter stupefaction.

"No, sir; just a quarter-past by your own clock, sir."

"And a bright afternoon?" he asked in the same tone.

"Well,—of course, sir, I don't presume to say as regards paintin'; but in a general way a very bright afternoon."

"O my God!" cried the painter suddenly.

The servant ran to his master, alarmed by that sudden exclamation, which sounded like a cry of agony.

"Is any thing the matter, sir?"

"No; go—go and get me a cab—immediately—I must go out—and I shall want you to go with me."

"Me, sir?

"Yes, you, sir! Go at once, man, for God's sake—and lose no time about it."

The servant departed in bewilderment of mind, and William Crawford groped his way through the outer darkness to the nearest chair. He sunk into the chair, covered his face with his hands, and burst into tears.

"Blind!" he cried; "blind! blind! I said I had nothing but my art, and now my art is lost to me."

He sat with his head bent forward on his breast, staring hopelessly into the darkness. Strain his eyeballs as he might, they could not pierce that darkness. He saw no Psyche and the Zephyrs, no lovely images created by his hand, no bright glimpse of summer sunshine on the smooth green lawn, no changing light upon the summer flowers, no tender shadows from the grand old cedars,—only darkness, utter darkness; beyond which it might be that his eyes were never again to penetrate.

"Cab, sir," said the man, presenting himself in the doorway.

"Come here, Dimond," William Crawford said very quietly; "come close to me, and give me your arm, please. I beg your pardon if I was impatient just now, but I have had a great shock. I have been working too hard lately, and have injured my sight. God only knows whether the injury is to be a lasting one; but for the moment I am quite blind. I think perhaps I shall manage better if you give me your hand to lead me to the cab. I must go at once to an oculist, and I shall want you to go with me."

CHAPTER VIII.

A TIMELY WARNING.

Mr. O'Boyneville enjoyed himself amazingly at Pevenshall. The man whose ordinary existence was one unceasing round of hard work was the most social of creatures when once set free from the daily round of labour. He enjoyed himself with a boisterous boyish delight in simple pleasures, and the Pevenshall visitors found his gaiety contagious. There are some people who succeed in society by mere force of animal spirits, and who are pardoned for solecisms that would be the perdition of a more timid blunderer. Laurence O'Boyneville did what he liked and said what he liked, with the reckless impulsiveness of his nation, and people forgave him and were pleased with him.

He gave himself up so thoroughly to the social delights of Mr. Lobyer's mansion, which was made

all the pleasanter by the frequent absence of its master, that he had no leisure for morbid anxieties of a domestic nature. The idea that he had any need to doubt the allegiance of the wife he loved and honoured had never presented itself to him in any shape, howsoever impalpable. She was his wife—a creature so much above suspicion, that only the rudest of awakenings could disturb his perfect confidence in her honour and truth. That he might leave her in one moment bright, beautiful, and smiling, and return in the next to find her dead, was a possibility within his power of conception; but that he could awake from his trust in her to find her false to him was a monstrous impossibility which his mind would have been unable to grasp. So he gave himself up to the pleasure of the hour, and devoted himself to the service of the fair sex with an indiscriminate and laborious gallantry, which the gilded youth fluttering around Mrs. Lobyer, and drawling some subtle half-implied compliment once in the twenty-four hours, beheld with amazement from afar off.

"I had no idea that Mr. O'Boyneville was such a delightful creature," Flo remarked to Cecil. "I hope I shall never again be without an Irishman in the house when I have a large party. That dear good-tempered husband of yours contrives to keep all the women in good humour. I'm sure that poor Miss Skairkrow had never had a civil word said to her on the subject of her personal appearance till Mr. O'Boyneville told her she was the image of the Empress of the French. He assured Miss Skeechoule that her voice reminded him of Grisi in her prime. And then there is pretty Mrs. Fitz-Cavendish, the *attaché's* wife, who has been surfeited with admiration, but who declares that there never was such an absurdly-delightful creature as your husband."

Cecil acknowledged these praises somewhat coldly. This noisy frivolous Irishman, whom other people thought so delightful, was no nearer to her than the overworked barrister of Brunswick Square. She was weak enough to feel something like anger against him for his genial good temper —for his utter blindness to her own deadly peril.

Hector Gordon had broken his promise. He had stayed at Pevenshall; and in the social intercourse of that pleasant mansion it was impossible for Cecil to avoid his companionship. Nor did Laurence O'Boyneville's presence shield her in any manner from that dangerous association. Serene in perfect confidence, the barrister amused himself noisily at one end of the drawing-room, while Major Gordon talked to his wife at the other.

So perverse is the human heart that this placid trustfulness offended the woman who was trusted. Cecil resented her husband's confidence as an evidence of indifference, and was angry with him for not being jealous.

"If I had a husband who loved me, he would come between me and my danger," she thought bitterly; "but my husband does not know what love is."

Unhappily there was some one at Pevenshall who did know, or who pretended to know, all the mysteries of that fatal passion; some one whose voice sounded very often in Cecil's ear, whose eyes were for ever seeking hers. Heaven knows

that she did her best to avoid him; but her best efforts were very weak and futile as compared to the machinery which the Eumenides employed against her. A thousand little circumstances conspired to force her into the society of the man she feared. At races, and picnics, and water parties, and rustic gatherings of every description, she was always finding Hector Gordon by her side. The old companionship of the Fortinbras time arose again; but now there was always a guilty consciousness, a remorseful agony lurking amidst the unhallowed happiness; and O, the meanness, the deception, the grovelling guiltiness, which was the everyday cost of that forbidden joy! Balancing one against the other, Cecil knew how heavily the perpetual remorse outweighed those brief moments of feverish gladness, when the sound of Hector's voice lulled her with its fatal music, and the tender pressure of Hector's hand lifted her above the common earth.

"If I could get away to some quiet hiding-place at the other end of the world, where he *could not* follow me, I might escape him, and be in-

nocent and happy once more," she thought. That escape for which she yearned seemed every day more difficult. The poor frail rudderless bark was hovering on the very brink of a whirlpool, and there was no friendly hand to steer it back to safety. Sometimes Cecil resolved that she would confess every thing to her husband, and demand the shelter she needed; but the barrister's good-humoured indifference was more repellant to her in her present frame of mind than the fiercest severity of a jealous husband could possibly have been. It would have been a relief to her to be suspected. She wanted an occasion to throw herself into her husband's arms, and cry, "Have pity upon my wickedness, and save me from myself!" Perhaps in these latter days, when the chronicles of the Divorce-Court furnish such piquant reading for middle-class breakfast-tables, it would be well if husbands were a little more inclined to jealous watchfulness, and somewhat less disposed to believe implicitly in their own invincible claims to all love and duty. More than once had Cecil nerved herself for the ordeal. She had resolved on humiliating herself

before the husband whose indifference wounded her; but after waiting for an hour or more in the loneliness of her own apartment until it should please her lord and master to withdraw himself from some social masculine gathering in the smoking-room below—after waiting with the words she meant to speak arranging and rearranging themselves in her brain, the remorseful wife found it impossible to begin her guilty story, and to open her heart to a man who was chuckling over the capital things he had been saying, and who insisted on relating the triumphs he had just achieved in argument.

Against that every-day joviality, that commonplace good-humour, the flood-tide of passion dashed impotently, as storm-beaten waters break against a groin of solid masonry. So the days went by, and Mr. O'Boyneville enjoyed himself, while the Fates worked their worst against helpless Cecil, who found herself day by day in more frequent association with the man who loved her, and who persisted in reminding her perpetually of his love.

Pevenshall was very full and very gay. Amidst

so many people and so much gaiety flirtations that would have made scandal in a quieter household passed unnoticed, except by a few quiet watchers unengaged by schemes of their own. Sir Nugent Evershed appeared at the York Meeting, where one of his horses ran a bad second for the Great Ebor, and after the races was almost a daily guest at Mr. Lobyer's mansion. The Irish barrister had been some time at Pevenshall when Mrs. MacClaverhouse arrived on a flying visit. She had been visiting further north, and she took Mrs. Lobyer's house on her way homewards, in accordance with an old promise made to Flo, who liked the lively dowager.

"I must only stay with you three or four days at the most, my dear," she said to her hostess; "for I am due in Hampshire next week, at a dear old rectory which is supposed to be haunted; though I must confess the ghosts have never come my way. But there are some people who may spend their lives in tapestried chambers and not see any thing out of the common."

Before Mrs. MacClaverhouse had been half-a-

dozen hours at Pevenshall she had taken occasion to interrogate her nephew respecting the sale of his commission. She put him through so sharp an examination that the Major was fain to confess the existence of motives which it was impossible for him to explain.

"Then they must be bad motives," exclaimed the dowager, "and unworthy of the true-hearted lad I used to be so proud of. You can't suppose that *I* wished you to go out to Japan to be killed by a herd of horrible creatures with small eyes and pigtails; but I've heard people speak sneeringly about your sudden selling out, and the malicious wretches have made me feel quite uneasy."

"You needn't be uneasy, my dear aunt," answered Hector; "it's not a case of 'the white feather,' if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I mean, and you know as well as I do that it is not. I don't like those mysterious motives which you can't explain."

The Major shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating gesture. He might give his aunt Indian shawls and ivory caskets and *carte blanche* upon

his wine-merchant; but there were secrets which he did not hold himself bound to reveal to that lady. She took his refusal very quietly.

"When people object to tell me things, I generally contrive to find them out for myself," she said calmly; and from this time, though she enjoyed the delights of Pevenshall to the uttermost, she kept a sharp eye upon her handsome nephew, and an assiduous ear for all floating gossip that accidental breezes wafted in her way.

She stayed a week; and on hearing that Mr. O'Boyneville had occasion to run up to town on the day following her intended departure, she delayed that departure in order to avail herself of his escort.

"I suppose you won't object to take care of an old woman between this and King's Cross, Mr. O'Boyneville," she said after proposing this arrangement. Of course the barrister declared himself delighted to be of service; but Cecil, who knew her strong-minded kinswoman's independent spirit, was not a little surprised by this sudden desire for masculine protection. Mr. O'Boyneville was only to

sleep one night in Brunswick Square, and then go on to the west of England, where he had business of importance to transact for a friend. The affair would not occupy him more than a week, he said, and he should hurry back to Pevensall directly he was free to do so. Cecil made no objection to this arrangement. It pleased her husband to leave her in order to attend to his business, and she let him go. A strange calmness had taken possession of her during the last few days. She was absent-minded, and frequently answered at random: more than once she had complained of headache, and had kept her room; but when her husband asked her if there was any thing serious the matter and entreated her to see a medical man, she assured him that her illness was only nervous. The dowager visited her on this occasion, and questioned her sharply; but, for the first time in her experience, that worthy matron found herself repulsed by a sullen obstinacy on the part of her niece.

"Your questioning me won't cure my headache," Lady Cecil said; "believe me it is much

better to let me alone. I am not worth the trouble you take about me."

"But, Cecil, if you are really ill, I must insist upon your having advice; and if you are not ill, this shutting yourself up in your room is very absurd. That dear good O'Boyneville is most uneasy about you."

The stentorian laughter of the dear good O'Boyneville floating upward in the summer air made itself heard at this moment through the open windows. The barrister was enjoying himself on the terrace with the most lively of the Pevenshall visitors.

"Yes; he is very uneasy about me, auntie," said Cecil; "any one can perceive that."

Mrs. MacClaverhouse gave an impatient shrug and departed.

"If I had been your mother in the days when George III. was a young man, and pert chits like you were taught to respect their elders, how soundly I would have boxed those pretty little ears of yours! A sound box on the ear is what you want, Lady Cecil, and I only wish that

Laurence O'Boyneville were the man to give it to you."

Thus soliloquised the dowager as she lingered for a few moments at the door of her niece's chamber. She encountered Hector Gordon by and by in the lower regions, and treated him more cavalierly than that favourite of fortune was wont to be treated. He bore her ill-usage very meekly, and carefully avoided the severe glare of those hard gray eyes which had been apt to soften when they looked at him.

On the next morning the dowager and Mr. O'Boyneville took their departure. Cecil bade them adieu in a strange mechanical manner, which the barrister was too busy and too hurried to notice. He did indeed perceive that his wife was paler than usual, and that she drew herself away from him when he would have embraced her at parting; but the pallor was accounted for by the nervous headache, from which she confessed herself still a sufferer, and the chilling refusal of the embrace was attributed to the inconvenient presence of the matched footmen, who were on guard

in the hall, and of Mr. and Mrs. Lobyer, who had emerged from the dining-room to speed their parting guests. The generous-minded Othello needs a hint from Iago before he can see flaw or speck in Desdemona's purity, though she may plead never so persistently for Cassio's reinstatement; and the idea that his wife's conduct had any hidden meaning was still far away from Laurence O'Boyneville's mind.

"I shall come back for you in a week, Cecil," he said; and amid the confusion of adieus and good wishes he had no time to perceive his wife's silence.

At the station Mrs. MacClaverhouse suggested that the barrister should secure a compartment for their own special use by the diplomatic administration of a half-crown to the guard.

"I want to have a little quiet talk with you as we go up to town," she said.

Mr. O'Boyneville complied, wondering. At the first junction the branch train melted into an express, which tore London-wards at the rate of fifty miles an hour; but Mrs. MacClaverhouse and

her nephew-in-law had their quiet talk in spite of the ponderous pantings of the giant that was bearing them to their destination; and the quiet talk must needs have been of a very serious nature, for the barrister was as pale as a ghost when he alighted at King's Cross.

He conducted Mrs. MacClaverhouse to a cab nevertheless, and saw her packages and her maid safely bestowed along with her in that vehicle. On bidding her adieu, he bent his head to say something which was not to be heard by the maid.

"I thank you very much," he said,—"very much. I am not afraid. No, Mrs. MacClaverhouse, with God's help, I am not afraid!"

CHAPTER IX.

"HE'S SWEETEST FRIEND, OR HARDEST FOE."

WHILE Mr. O'Boyneville was parting with the dowager at the terminus, Cecil walked with Hector Gordon on the terrace at Pevenshall.

The August afternoon was almost stifling in its sultry heat; and most of the Pevenshall idlers had taken shelter in the drawing-room. A group of young ladies were clustered under a great beech on the lawn listening to the perusal of a new novel; and with the exception of this party and the two promenaders on the terrace the gardens were deserted.

Cecil and Hector walked slowly up and down the terrace. For some time they had been silent. It was one of those oppressive days which weigh down the liveliest spirits; but on Cecil's face there was a profound melancholy not to be accounted for by atmospheric influences. Nor was

the countenance of the Major much brighter of aspect. He seemed divided between his own sombre thoughts and an anxious curiosity as to the meditations of his companion.

"Tell me you are not unhappy, darling," he said at last; "for pity's sake tell me that the idea of the step you have decided upon taking does not make you unhappy."

"You do not think that I can feel very happy, do you, Hector?"

"If you loved me as I—"

"Does the thought of our future make *you* happy?" cried Cecil passionately. "O Hector, you know as well as I do that henceforward happiness must be impossible for you and me. It is agreed that we cannot endure the miserable deception, the shameful degradation of our lives any longer—that we must escape from this atmosphere of falsehood at any sacrifice—at any cost to ourselves. We have discussed this so often that there is no need of further discussion; and you have brought me to see things as you see them. You have wrung a promise from me, and I am pre-

pared to keep it. But for mercy's sake do not talk to me of happiness."

The soldier ventured no reply to this speech. The gloom deepened upon his countenance as he watched the pale face of his companion. They came to the end of the terrace presently, and paused under the statue of Pomona, as they had done in the moonlight some weeks before. They stood here side by side for some time, she looking straight before her at the drowsy summer landscape, he keeping close watch upon her face.

She had promised to leave her husband with Hector Gordon. She had promised to pass away with him into the outer darkness, beyond the confines of the only world she knew. By what passionate pleading, by what subtle argument, her lover had brought her to accept this course as a fatal necessity, need not be set down here. When a man's infatuation or a man's selfishness overrides his sense of truth and honour, he can find arguments enough to serve him in such a cause. That he loved her was beyond all question; that the penalty involved in his dishonour was scarcely

less than the sacrifice to be made by her was also true;— but it was no less true that the passion which demanded so cruel a sacrifice was a base and selfish one.

It is difficult to imagine how any woman can arrive at such a decision as that made by Lady Cecil. The descent of Avernus is so gradual a slope, that it is only when the traveller finds himself at the bottom of the gulf that he perceives how terrible has been the rapidity of his progress. Ample opportunity had been given Hector Gordon for the pleading of his wicked cause. The Fates had conspired to assist his evil work; and even when some short-lived pang of self-reproach prompted him to abandon his relentless pursuit, some little circumstance, too insignificant to be remembered, always occurred to strangle the feeble resolution.

Little by little Cecil had learnt to believe that the tie between herself and her husband must needs be broken. She had learnt to believe that the daily and hourly deceptions of the last few weeks constituted a more terrible sin than any

open rupture with the man she had sworn to love and honour. The seducer's fatal philosophy had done its work, and she accepted the justice of his reasoning. It was surely better that she should forfeit the place she had no right to hold in her husband's confidence and esteem—better that he should know her for a false wife, an outcast from him and from society, than that he should trust her as a true one while her love and allegiance were really given to another. This was the conviction which had taken possession of Cecil's mind. She was prepared to leave her husband, and abandon her home and station for the fatal protection of a lover; but she had no hope of any future happiness to be won by this terrible sacrifice. She sought only to escape from the daily falsehood that tortured and humiliated her. It was within a very short period that this fatal conviction had taken root in her heart. Before that time she had trusted in her own honour—in Hector Gordon's forbearance—in her husband's power to save her from herself. But her own sense of honour had been weak to sustain her against a lover's subtle

power of reasoning. Hector had shown no forbearance; and her last hope in the protection of her husband had been disappointed by reason of Laurence O'Boyneville's unsympathetic joviality.

Looking at her this afternoon as they stood silently side by side, Hector saw something like despair in the pale still face. It was not a hopeful aspect of affairs for a lover who had sacrificed so much in order to induce the woman he loved to break the bonds that bound her to another man and plight her perjured faith to him. He had won her promise to be his, but she had not promised to be happy; and a chilling sense of terror thrilled through his heart as he fancied that perhaps she had spoken the truth just now, and that henceforward there could be no such thing as happiness for these two who loved each other so dearly. He had not calculated upon this. Cecil might desire only to escape from a miserable present, but Hector had believed in a bright future. What could mar his happiness, if the woman he loved was his companion, his own for ever and for ever? Loss of position, tarnished honour, the memory of

a great wrong done to an unsuspecting man—what were these but trifles when weighed in the balance with an all-absorbing love?

The ordeal through which he must needs drag the creature he loved so dearly might indeed be a terrible one; but once passed, the future lay bright and fair before them—a future in which they would be together. But now all at once a new light dawned upon him. He might be happy—for how could he be otherwise than happy with her?—but would she be content? That calm despair in the pale face gave no promise of peace.

"Poor girl, poor girl! it is harder for her than for me," he thought sadly.

And then presently some brief awakening of conscience impelled him to speak.

"Cecil," he cried; "it is not too late! If you wish to retract—if you repent your promise—"

"No, I will keep my promise. I never can go back to my husband any more. If he loved me—if there were any sympathy between us, he might have saved me from myself, Hector—and

from you. O, I know how selfish this must sound; —you have sacrificed so much for me—your career—your future—I have learnt to understand the sacrifice since I have heard people wonder why you took such a step. And it was for my sake. No, Hector, I will not break my promise. I should be weak, dishonourable, selfish beyond all measure, if I could break my promise after what it has cost you to win it."

A woman has always more or less inclination for self-sacrifice. Let her once be fully persuaded that it is her duty to throw herself away for the welfare or the pleasure of some one she loves, and she is in hot haste to take the fatal step that shall hurl her to destruction. Cecil was not a woman who could entertain any hope of happiness from such a course as that which she was about to take. If she could make her lover happy, if she could atone to him in some manner for the foolish sacrifice of his career, she would be content; but no false glamour illumined her miserable pathway. She was going to her destruction—blindly perhaps —but with a full knowledge that there was dark-

ness around her, and that no light could ever shine upon the way she was treading.

Hector talked to her of their plans; and she listened quietly, and acquiesced in all his arrangements. The details of their flight had been settled before to-day. The Major was to leave Pevenshall in the evening by the mail, on pretence of some sudden summons for which his afternoon letters would furnish the excuse. Cecil was to leave the next morning, in obedience to a letter from her husband. In the way which they were going, there seemed to be nothing but falsehood and deception; but Hector reminded his companion that this was only a brief ordeal through which they must pass to perfect freedom.

"I know how painful it is for you, darling," the Major said tenderly; "but in a few days we shall be far away from all this wretchedness, in the dear little Brittany village I have told you of so often, with the mountains behind us, and the sea before; and then we will go on to Italy, and wander from place to place till you come some day to the spot in which you would like to live.

And there I will build you the brightest home that a man ever made for his idol."

"But you, Hector—your career, your ambition—"

"My career is finished, and I have no ambition except to be with you."

He had said the same thing a hundred times, in a hundred different fashions; but to-day the tender words could not bring the faintest smile to Cecil's face. She knew that she was about to commit a terrible sin; and she had none of the passionate recklessness which can alone sustain the sinner. A stronger will than her own was carrying her along the fatal pathway, and a perverted sense of honour kept her faithful to the promise which had been extorted from her by her lover's despair. She was like that unhappy knight whose

"Honour rooted in dishonour stood."

All the details of the flight had been planned by Hector before this afternoon; but he had found some difficulty in explaining them to Cecil. The paltry details seemed more detestable than the sin

itself; and the soldier's pride and delicacy alike revolted against the necessities of his position. Yet in due course all had been arranged. Cecil was to go straight to Brunswick Square, there to make hurried preparations for her flight, and to write her farewell letter to her husband, who would have started on his western journey before she left the north. In Brunswick Square she was to see Hector, who would come to her in the course of the day to assure himself of her safe arrival, and on the following morning they were to meet at the station in time to leave London by the Dover mail. Before Mr. O'Boyneville returned to town they would be far away, and there would be little trace of them left to mark the way by which they had gone.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE BRINK.

MAJOR GORDON left Pevenshall by the mail, and on the following morning Cecil bade adieu to her friend, who was rather inclined to resent her abrupt departure.

"I don't believe a bit in Mr. O'Boyneville's summons," said Flo; "you are tired of us, and you want to go away, Cecil; you are deceiving me just as you deceived me before. However, of course I cannot keep you here against your will; and I can only regret that we have not succeeded in making you happy."

Whereupon Cecil declared that Pevenshall was all that is delightful; and that she should never forget Mrs. Lobyer's kindness and affection. The impulsive Florence would upon this have embraced her friend; but Cecil drew herself away from the embrace.

"Wherever you go, dear, I shall remember you and your goodness," she said; "and, O Florence, I hope you will be happy."

As the two women stood for a moment holding each other's hands, and looking in each other's faces, Cecil would fain have uttered some word of warning to the friend she never thought to see again. But she remembered what a mockery any warning must seem hereafter from her tainted lips; though who so well as this poor shipwrecked creature, newly foundered on a rock, could tell of the dangers that beset a woman's pathway? Holding Mrs. Lobyer's hands silently in her own, she fancied how her friend would remember that parting when her own name had become a byword and reproach.

"Will she have any pity upon me, I wonder, for the sake of our past friendship; or will she be as merciless as the rest of the world?"

This is what Cecil thought in that parting moment, while her packages were being put in the carriage, and the imperturbable footman attended with her shawls and parasols.

"You will come to us at Christmas," cried Flo.

"I fear not, dear. Good-bye."

Cecil was seated in the carriage in the next minute, waving her hand to Florence, and a little group of young ladies who had placed themselves at the hall-door to witness her departure. Splendid Pevenshall swam before her in a mist as she looked at that group of light-hearted girls fluttering like a cluster of butterflies in the morning sunshine.

"I shall never again pass the threshold of such a house," she thought.

All through the homeward journey, she felt like a traveller in a dream. She sat in a corner of the carriage with her eyes fixed upon the changing landscape; but she saw only a confusion of undulating corn-fields and summer verdure.

She went mechanically through the business of her arrival, and reached Brunswick Square without accident; but the clamour of the London streets sounded in her ears like the booming of a stormy sea.

An unearthly quiet seemed to pervade the

Bloomsbury Mansion. The respectful Pupkin uttered some faint exclamation of surprise on beholding his mistress; but beyond this Cecil heard neither voice nor sound. She avoided her own apartments while they were being prepared for her reception, and went straight to the drawing-rooms, where every thing remained exactly as she had left it five or six weeks before. The birds set up a feeble rejoicing as they recognised their mistress; but she did not approach the window where their cages hung in the London sunshine.

She looked at her watch; her life to-day was a question of hours. She had her packing to accomplish—a painful kind of packing, for it involved the setting aside of every trinket her husband had ever given her. She intended to take with her only the plainest dresses and the absolute necessaries of her toilet; she doubted whether even these things could be really hers when once she crossed the threshold of that house. There seemed to be a kind of dishonesty in taking with her the most insignificant trifle that had been bought with Laurence O'Boyneville's money.

There was one task before Lady Cecil even more painful than the preparations for her journey, and that task was the writing of the letter which should tell Mr. O'Boyneville that his wife had decided on leaving him. How could she do it? how could she put her wickedness into words? what could she say to him? "You have never been unkind to me; I have no accusation to bring against you; you have only been unsympathetic; and a man whom I love better than truth and honour has persuaded me to abandon you."

Never in all her life had Cecil suffered such anguish as the writing of that letter cost her. It seemed a cold, hard, cruel letter when it was written, so curtly did it announce her guilty design; but though there was little trace of feeling in the written lines, the slow tears rolled down her pallid cheeks as she wrote, and her hand trembled so violently that it was with difficulty she could make her writing legible.

"O Hector!" she cried piteously; "if you could know what I suffer for your sake—for your sake!"

Somehow or other the letter was written, sealed, and addressed; and then she sat looking at it in a kind of stupor.

"If it were really not too late—if I dared ask him to release me," she thought.

But in the next moment she remembered the solemn nature of her promise, the sacrifice her lover had made to win it.

"O, no, no, no!" she cried; "it is too late; I am bound to him by my promise."

And then she asked herself whether, if there had been no such promise, she could have remained in that house as Laurence O'Boyneville's wife. She had wronged him so much in word and in thought, that her innocence of deeper and more irrevocable wrong seemed to be of little moment. Could she look in his face without humiliation? Could she accept his confidence without dishonour? No; a thousand times no; and this being so, she was no wife for him.

"Come what may, I must leave my husband," she thought. "O, if I could go alone! if I could only go away by myself to some

quiet hiding-place, and never be heard of any more!"

She thought this in all sincerity. Her love for the tempter had been in a great measure annihilated by the horror of the temptation. The sense of her guilt was so great an agony that there was little room in her mind for any other feeling. It seemed as if the current of Fate was drifting her along, and that she was no more than a weed, carried onward by an impetuous torrent. She knew that destruction lay before her; but she had no power to resist the force of the stream.

After the writing of the letter, she sat for some time in a listless attitude, looking vacantly at the envelope with her husband's name upon it. Her head ached with a dull pain, and there was confusion in her thoughts. She could not ponder deliberately upon the step that she was going to take. This inability to think quietly had possessed her ever since she had arrived at the fatal conclusion to which her lover had urged her. She had accepted the doctrine of necessity; she had allowed herself to be persuaded that it was her

destiny to do wrong; and once having yielded to this unnatural creed, the false god she had created was stronger than herself, and she became indeed a powerless creature in the hands of Fate.

Apollo had spoken; sorrow and shame lay before her, her inevitable portion.

The day crept on, and she knew that with every hour the current that was drifting her gathered new strength. Hector was to devote this day to the settlement of his own affairs; for a man has need to make some little preparation on the eve of an exile that may last his lifetime. The day crept on—a dull sultry day at the close of August—and still Cecil kept her listless attitude by the table with her husband's letter lying before her. She knew that she was not to expect any visit from Hector until late in the afternoon, since the business he had to transact would occupy the best part of his day. But though she was lonely and wretched, she felt no eagerness for his coming. What relief or consolation could he bring her? What was he but her accomplice in wrong, with whom she had plotted a crime, and to whom she

was pledged for the due accomplishment of that evil deed?

Amid the many thoughts that succeeded one another in the confusion of her brain, there was the thought that guilty wretches who had plotted the details of a murder must feel very much as she felt to-day. She could fancy them, when all had been planned and the hour appointed, waiting in weary idleness for the time to come. She could fancy them watching the slow hands upon the dial, and wishing either that time could come to a dead stop for ever and ever, or that the hour had arrived and the deed were done. The stillness of the house seemed to her like the stillness that precedes death and horror. She fancied her husband coming home from his journey in a day or two to find the same dull quiet in the house, and his wife's letter waiting for him on the table.

"If he loved me, the blow would kill him," she thought; "but he does not love me. His profession is all the world to him. If he had loved me, I think it would have been easy for me to confess my wickedness and ask his forgiveness. He will

be sorry, perhaps,—more sorry for me than for himself,—but his grief will not last long. He will have Westminster Hall, and his hope of getting into Parliament. He is not like Hector; he would never have allowed his love for me to interfere with his career."

It was nearly five o'clock when she roused herself from this miserable apathy and went to her room to begin the preparations for to-morrow's flight. She was to dine at half-past six, so she had brief leisure for her work. One by one she set aside the jewels that her husband had given her. They were not very numerous, but they were valuable, and in a simple taste that did credit to Mr. O'Boyneville's judgment.

Like that wretched wife in Kotzebue's tragedy, Lady Cecil could not fail to remember the occasion on which each gift had been presented. The emerald-and-diamond bracelet on her birthday; the cameos in Etruscan setting on the anniversary of her marriage; the suite of turquoise rings and bracelets in solid bands of lustreless gold, bestowed upon her in commemoration of some professional

triumph of Mr. O'Boyneville's, as grand in its way as Erskine's defence of Hardy. The thought of her husband's quiet pleasure in these offerings came back to her as she touched them.

"I think he must have loved me then," she murmured, as she remembered the evening on which he had taken the case of cameos from his pocket to lay it on the little table by which she sat at work. He had loved her a little at that time, she thought; he had loved her a little when he sought her as his wife; but always with that moderate and negative affection for which alone there is room in the breast of a man who devotes himself to an arduous profession. It had not been given to Cecil to understand the possibility of hidden fires burning steadily beneath the dull outward crust of the working-man's nature. She did not know the capacity for deep and passionate feeling which may exist in the nature of a man whose daily labour leaves him no leisure for the revelation of the better and brighter part of his mind. She had expected to find a husband only an improved edition of a lover; and finding him some-

thing altogether different—a creature who accepted her affection as a matter of course, and was disagreeably candid on the subject of an unbecoming bonnet,—she concluded all at once that she was no longer beloved, and that her life was desolate.

The dismal dinner-hour had arrived by the time she had collected the trinkets in her jewel-case, and had packed two or three dresses and her most indispensable possessions in the one trunk which she was to take with her. She went to the dining-room, and made a miserable pretence of dining, with the inestimable Pupkin in attendance, and the evening sunlight shining into the dingy pictures on the wall opposite to her. Every thing in Brunswick Square looked unspeakably dull and faded and dusty after the splendour of Pevenshall. She thought of the moonlit terrace, and the fair summer landscape sanctified by the night. The very tones of Hector Gordon's passionate pleading came back to her ears; but they moved her with no answering thrill of passion; her love had perished in the misery which it had brought upon her. She thought of that little village in

Brittany which he had described to her so eloquently; the rustic retreat in which they were to spend the first few months of their union — O God, what a union! A vague horror was mingled even with the thought of that pine-clad mountain and the purple sea. Her lover had dwelt so fondly on the beauty of the scene; and yet, in Brunswick Square, with the summer sunshine coming to her on a slanting column of dust, and with a street-organ droning in the distance, she thought of that far-away paradise with a shudder. In this crisis of her fate, she felt like a creature standing between two lives—the dull slow river of commonplace existence; the stormy ocean of passion and guilt. She looked backward to the river with a vague yearning; she looked forward to the ocean with an unutterable fear.

The shadowy banquet occupied less than half-an-hour, and it was only seven o'clock when Cecil went back to the drawing-room. Seven: he would be with her soon! He too would have made his pretence of dining, no doubt, at one of his clubs. The crisis in a well-bred man's fate must be

desperate indeed when he abandons that pretence of dining, or faces the universe with a reckless toilet. Seven. The windows were open; the canaries were making a discordant scraping with their beaks against the wires of the cages, and noisy children were emerging from the square. Cecil looked down at them from her window, and remembered the stories she had heard of women who had run away from such households as those. She remembered one especial history,—the wretched story of a woman who abandoned her husband and children under the influence of an infatuation which remained an unsolvable mystery to the last. It was from Brighton that the hapless creature took flight; and she told one of the few friends who remained to her after that time, how at the last, just as she had crossed the threshold of her husband's house, she heard, or fancied that she heard, a cry from one of her children, and would have gone back—would at that ultimate moment have repented and returned—if a cruel wind had not closed the door in her face, and set the seal upon her doom! She had not the

courage to ring the bell. She went away to keep her tryst with the man who had made himself her master, and to have her name a byword and reproach for ever after that fatal day.

The wheels of an impetuous hansom ground against the curb-stone while Lady Cecil stood at the window thinking of this dismal story; and her lover alighted from the vehicle. He stopped to pay the driver—he must have paid the driver even if he had been going to assist in the execution of a murder—and the man drove away slowly through the smoky summer gloaming, contented with his fare.

Cecil was still standing by the window when Pupkin announced Major Gordon: she turned her head and waited for her lover; and even in that moment of waiting, as he came towards her through the twilit room, she thought how different would have been her greeting of him, if she had been his wife—if she had had any right to be glad of his coming.

"My own darling!" said Hector, in a low tender voice.

She gave him her hand in silence, and he

stood by her side in the window, holding the poor cold hand, and looking down at her with unutterable affection.

"My own dear girl, how pale you are in this dim light! I hope it is the light, and that you are not really looking so ill as I fancy you look. I have done every thing, dear. I have seen the lawyers, the bankers, the stockbrokers,—every body; and am free to go to the end of the world—to the very end of the world! Look up, darling; let me see the face I used to dream of on my way back to India, after our parting at Fortinbras."

She lifted her head from its drooping attitude and looked at him with a countenance in which there was a mournful resignation that sent a chill to his heart.

"O my darling, if you could only look forward as happily to our future as I do! I know that there is much for you to suffer—just at first; but when once we are clear of England, and all the brightest countries in the universe are before us, the miserable past will fade away like a dream."

"Do you think so, Hector? Shall I ever forget—shall I ever forget?"

"Let it be considered my fault if you remember. I charge myself with the happiness of your life. You cannot blame me too bitterly if you are unhappy. And now, darling, let us discuss our plans for the last time. I hope they won't bring us lights. It is so nice to sit in this dreamy twilight. I shall always think tenderly of Brunswick Square, for the sake of this one evening, Cecil."

They sat by the open window, and Hector talked about the future. He talked about the future, which, by his showing, was to be one long idyl; and while he talked, the woman who sat by his side would fain have cast herself at his feet, crying:

"Release me from my guilty promise! Have pity upon me, and set me free!"

She would fain have done this, but she sat by his side and listened quietly to hopeful words that jarred strangely with the dull anguish which had possessed her all through the long wretched day.

They were still sitting in the summer dusk, when a firmer footstep than Pupkin's sounded on the landing-place, and the door suddenly opened.

"Laurence!" cried Cecil, starting to her feet, as she recognised the stalwart figure in the doorway.

It was indeed Mr. O'Boyneville, with the dust of travel upon him. He took his wife in his arms and kissed her tenderly; and he gave friendly greeting to Major Gordon, but he did not offer his hand to that gentleman.

"Pupkin told me of your return," he said to Cecil; "what brought you back so unexpectedly?"

It was some moments before Cecil answered, and even then she could not reply without hesitation.

"I was so tired of Pevenshall."

"Tired of Pevenshall! I thought you were enjoying yourself so much there. Well, dear, you were quite right to come back if you were tired. Let us have the lights, and some tea."

The barrister went to the fireplace to ring one of the bells. He happened to choose the bell

nearest that angle of the chimneypiece on which Cecil had placed two sealed envelopes addressed to her husband. One contained the letter announcing her flight; the other the key of her jewel-case and wardrobe. Mr. O'Boyneville's piercing gaze alighted on these letters as he rang the bell.

"For me?" he asked, advancing his hand towards the two packets.

"No!" Cecil cried eagerly; "they are mine."

She snatched them from the mantelpiece and put them in her pocket, and then she seated herself by the table on which she was wont to make tea. Mr. O'Boyneville walked slowly up and down the room. Major Gordon kept his place by the open window. Nothing could be more inconvenient than this unlooked-for return of the barrister, which in all probability would interfere with the arrangements of the next day. The Major felt all the degradation of his position, but was determined to hold his ground nevertheless. The barrister would most likely retire to his study directly after tea, and thereby afford Hector the opportunity of speaking to Cecil before he left. There was an

unspeakable dreariness, a palpable desolation in that Bloomsbury drawing-room, which oppressed Hector Gordon as he stood by the window, looking sometimes out into the square where the lamps burned dimly in the gray evening light, sometimes into the dusky room, where the barrister's figure loomed large athwart the shadows. Cecil sat in a listless attitude, waiting to perform that simple household duty which must seem such a mockery to her to-night. The lamps came presently, and the big plated tea-tray and old-fashioned urn, with impossible lion-heads holding rings in their mouths. The light of the lamps was painfully dazzling to her aching eyes. She began to pour out the tea mechanically, and the two men came to the table to take their cups from her hands. As they stood side by side doing this, the thought arose in her mind of that one treason which stands alone amongst all the treasons of mankind; and the figure of her lover bending over the cups and saucers blended itself horribly with the image of Judas Iscariot dipping his hand into the dish.

Mr. O'Boyneville drank his tea after his usual absent-minded fashion, staring into space as he slowly sipped the beverage. He rose after emptying his second cup and began to pace the room again, while Hector sat near the lamp-lit table watching Cecil with anxious earnest eyes.

"You scarcely expected me to-night, I suppose, Cecil," said the barrister.

"No; I did not expect you."

"I didn't think I should return so soon; but the business I am involved in just now is a very serious one."

"Indeed!"

She spoke mechanically, feeling herself called upon to speak. Hector did not even affect any interest in Mr. O'Boyneville's conversation. A kind of sullenness had taken possession of him since the barrister's entrance; and he kept his place silently with a dogged determination to remain, knowing all the time that he had no right to be there, and that Cecil's husband had good reason to wonder at his presence.

"Yes; it is a very unpleasant business,—a

painful business. Of course I have only to consider the technicalities involved in it. I am consulted on a question that has arisen respecting a marriage-settlement; but when people want a counsel's opinion, they are obliged to tell him other things besides technicalities. I am very sorry for the poor woman."

"What poor woman?" asked Cecil; still because she felt herself obliged to appear interested.

"The poor deluded creature who has left her husband."

If a thunderbolt had suddenly fallen through the roof of Mr. O'Boyneville's house, Cecil could scarcely have experienced a greater shock; but she gave no utterance to her feelings. She sat pale and motionless, like some unhappy wretch at a bar of justice waiting the awful sentence.

"Ah, I forgot," said the barrister; "you don't know the story. As I said just now, it's not a pleasant story, and perhaps I ought not to talk to you about it; but I can't get it out of my head. And yet it's common enough, Heaven knows; only it seems a little worse in this case than usual,

for the husband and wife had lived so happily together."

"Why did she leave him?"

This time it seemed to Cecil as if some unknown force within her compelled the question, so painful was the nature of her husband's conversation, so unwilling would she have been to continue it, had she possessed the power of bringing it to an end.

"Why did she leave him!" repeated the barrister. "Who can tell? There are women in Bethlehem Hospital who believe themselves to be queens of England, and there are miserable creatures in the same asylum who have murdered families of helpless children in sudden paroxysms of madness; but not one amongst them all could seem to me more utterly mad than this woman."

"You know the husband?" said Hector Gordon. He had risen during the barrister's discourse and was standing by the mantelpiece. He felt himself in a manner called upon to take some part in this discussion, and to defend the sinners if necessary.

"Yes; I know the husband."

"Was he so very devoted to his wife?"

"I am not quite sure of your idea of devotion. You see, you are a club-man, Major Gordon; you belong to the West-end and to a set of men who can afford to be what you call 'devoted.' I don't suppose you could realise the idea of a stockbroker's affection for his wife. Your City-man has very little opportunity for playing the ideal lover or the ideal husband. His wife's image may be with him even on 'Change. The details of his business are dry and dull and sordid in the eyes of other people; but he may be working for his wife all the time, and his existence may be more completely consecrated to her welfare and to her happiness than if he dawdled by her side all day on the margin of some romantic Italian lake, and only opened his lips to protest the singleness of his affection. Yes, Major Gordon, the City-man's devotion is the nobler; for it takes the form of unremitting toil and unending care, while the dawdler's love is only a shallow pretext for a sensuous laziness amidst beautiful scenery."

"I confess myself sceptical on the subject of your stockbroking Romeo," said Hector with a sneer. "With that sort of man a wife is only a superior kind of housekeeper. I don't believe in the poetry of Bartholomew Lane. Your City-man works hard because money-making is his habit, his vice, like dram-drinking; not because he wants to make a fortune for his wife and children."

"You think so?"

"Most assuredly I think so."

"And you do not believe that your hard-working man has his own bright picture of an ideal home always before his mind? I don't think you can have studied the habits of Englishmen, Major Gordon, or you would understand the City-man better. Look about you, and behold the incarnation of English prosperity in the Englishman's home. It is for that he works. It is in order to achieve that luxurious haven that he wastes the best years of his life in the smoke and dust and heat and turmoil of the commercial battle-ground. And what does his home represent, with all its splendour of pictures and furniture, and gardens

and stables; but his devotion to his wife and children? Build what palace he may, his clubs will give him better rooms than he can build for himself. Whatever salary he pays his cook, there will be better cooks at the Reform or the London Tavern. But the hard-working Englishman wants a home; a dining-room in which his children may gather around him as he sips his famous claret; a drawing-room where, amidst all the splendour, there will be a corner for his wife's workbasket, a hiding-place for his baby's last new toy. And you elegant drones of the West-end see this poor working bee—this dust-begrimed money-grub—and you say such a creature cannot know what it is to love his wife; and if the wife happens to be a pretty woman, you have neither pity nor respect for the husband. Poor, miserable, money-earning machine, what is he that he should be pitied or respected? It can be no sin to bring ruin and desolation upon such a creature's home."

"You are eloquent to-night, Mr. O'Boyneville."

"O, you know it is my trade to be eloquent

about other people's business. I really do feel for this poor man. I have been in his house to-day: such a house—I could have fancied there had been a funeral, and that the coffin had only just been taken away; there was such palpable desolation in the place."

"And the husband," asked Cecil, with real interest this time, "was he sorry?"

"Sorry! Can you fancy the sorrow for a loss which is so much worse than death that it would be happiness to the mourner if he could awake from a dream to find his wife's coffin by his side? Sorry! Do you know what a broken life is? I do, Cecil. There are three lives ruined and broken by a woman's folly."

"Let the man who loves her bear the full burden of his guilt," said Hector eagerly. "Let him be responsible for the issue."

"God help him, poor creature!" cried the barrister.

"You pity him?"

"How can I help pitying him? You read of such a case in the papers, and think perhaps that

the seducer is a very fine fellow. He has persuaded a silly woman to make her name a public disgrace, and he has destroyed an honest man's existence. All that sounds very heroic. People wonder what diabolical charm the villain possessed. There are piquant paragraphs about him in the papers: a social leader holding him up to the execration of the million, but with a little flourish of poetry and passion for his glorification notwithstanding; and if his photograph could be published while his misdeeds had the gloss of novelty upon them, it would sell by thousands. But have you ever thought about the lives of these people after the nine-days' wonder is over, and they slip out of the public mind? Then comes the chastisement; then comes the old classic retribution: evil for evil, evil for evil. The man who did not scruple to destroy the entire scheme of another man's existence finds his own life wasted and broken. What is the universe for him henceforward?—a solitude, with the one wretched creature whom he has chosen for his companion."

"There can be no such thing as solitude with the woman he loves."

"The man who outrages honour and defies society will find his home something worse than a solitude—a prison, in which two galley-slaves pace to and fro, dragging at the hateful chain that links them together. Let the seducer love his victim never so fondly, the time too surely comes in which he learns to hate her. The time comes when the voice of a forgotten ambition reminds him how much he has sacrificed—for what? for the pale face of a penitent, whose wan eyes are filled with involuntary tears at the sight of the humblest peasant woman walking by her husband's side."

"A man must be a dastard who could count any sacrifice made for the woman he loves," said the Major.

"The man who steals another man's wife *is* a dastard," answered Mr. O'Boyneville. "Sooner or later he will count the cost of his folly; and the woman who has staked her salvation against the love of this one creature will awake some day

to find that the game is lost. She will see the reflection of her own remorse in her lover's face, blended with something worse than remorse. She will watch his dreary, purposeless life, spent in a foreign country, under a false name most likely; and she will think what he might have been but for her. Heaven help her! She must have a servile love of life for its own sake if she does not creep quietly from the house some dusky evening to drown herself in the nearest river. Nothing but her death can set her lover free; and even her death cannot extinguish the disgrace she has inflicted on her husband's name."

A half-stifled sob sounded through the room as the barrister came to a full stop. He went to his wife, and found her crying, with her hands clasped before her face.

"Forgive me, my dear," he said gently; "I forgot that this sort of story was not the thing to speak of before you. I let myself talk as if I were in court.—Why are you going away, Major? my wife will be better presently. We won't say any thing more about these miserable runaways.

—Look up, Cecil. There, you are all right now. —Must you really go?"

This question was addressed to Hector, who had taken up his hat, and was waiting to make his adieux.

"Yes; it is ten o'clock. I will call upon Lady Cecil to-morrow. I—I have something particular to say to her."

"Then I'm afraid you must defer the something particular for a week or two. I am going to take my wife to Devonshire by an early train to-morrow. Good-night;—but I'm coming down to my study, so I can let you out myself."

"Good-night, Lady Cecil."

"Good-night."

The words were scarcely audible. She rose as she gave him her hand, and they stood for a few moments face to face, while Mr. O'Boyneville walked towards the door; Hector mutely imploring some sign, Cecil looking at him with a blank, stupefied expression. To leave her thus, and on such a night—the night which was to have been the eve of a new life—was unspeakable

anguish. But he had no alternative: the barrister's eye was upon him; and a word, a look might have betrayed the woman he loved. He had no opportunity to ascertain whether to-morrow's appointment at the railway-station was to be kept, or whether Mr. O'Boyneville's return was to hinder Cecil's flight. He could only take his departure after the fashion of the most commonplace visitor, and must trust all to-morrow's schemes and to-morrow's hopes to the chapter of accidents.

"Good-night, Lady Cecil," he repeated; and he tried to put as much meaning into those two words as can be infused into any two syllables of the English language.

Mr. O'Boyneville conducted his guest to the street-door, and lingered on the threshold with him for a few moments talking pleasantly.

"You really think of going to the West of England to-morrow?" asked the Major. There is no such thing as honour when a man is engaged in a dishonourable cause; and not being able to talk to the wife, Hector Gordon was fain to extract the information he required from the husband.

"Yes," answered Mr. O'Boyneville; "I have business in that part of the country; and as my wife is not looking well, I shall take her with me. A week or two at Clovelly, or some sea-coast village, will set her up."

"Shall you start early?"

"Yes; by the eight-o'clock train."

Half-past eight was the hour for the Dover mail, and at a quarter-past Cecil and Hector were to have met at the station. All had been planned by the Major. She was to have told her servants that she was going into Hampshire to join her aunt, and was to have ordered a hack-cab to take her to the station. All had been thought of; but now delay was inevitable, and Hector had a presentiment that in this case delay meant the ruin of his hopes. He bade good-night to the barrister, and went away from the quiet Bloomsbury quarter with a heavy heart.

Mr. O'Boyneville smiled as he closed the door upon the departing visitor. "Thank God it's all over so quietly!" he muttered to himself. "It was best to take matters coolly. It would

always have been open to me to blow his brains out."

The barrister did not go to his study: he went back to the drawing-room, where he found his wife lying prostrate on the spot where Hector Gordon had bade her adieu. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her upstairs as easily as if she had been an infant.

He rang for one of the maids to attend on his unconscious wife; but before doing so, and before making any effort to restore Cecil from her fainting fit, he deliberately picked her pocket of the two letters which she had taken from the mantelpiece. Rapid as her movement had been when she took possession of these two packets, the barrister's piercing glances had discovered that they were addressed to himself.

"It's better that I should have them than any one else," he said, as he transferred the letters to his own pocket.

He left Cecil in the care of the housemaid, and sent for a medical man who had occasionally attended his wife. All that night he sat by Cecil's

bed-side, and through the greater part of the next day he still kept his post. There was no journey to Devonshire; and Hector Gordon, calling day by day in Brunswick Square, with a desperate defiance of appearances, was apt to find a doctor's brougham standing at the door, and for some time received an invariable answer from Pupkin—"Lady Cecil O'Boyneville was still very ill."

It was a long wearisome illness; a low fever, with frequent delirium, and a most terrible languor of mind and body. But slow and wearisome as the malady was in its nature, Laurence O'Boyneville knew no such thing as fatigue. He nursed his wife as tenderly as ever mother nursed her fading child; snatching his broken sleep or his hasty meal how and where he could, and carrying a bagful of briefs for the coming term to the sick chamber, there to read and ponder in the dead of the night, with ears always on the alert for the faintest variation in the low breathing of the beloved sleeper, and with his watch open before him to mark the hour when medicines were to be administered. The hired nurse, who performed the

commoner duties of the sick chamber, snored peacefully in Cecil's dressing-room during the dismal night-watch, and was loud in her praises of the husband's devotion,— "which if there was more like him, our dooties wouldn't be that wearin' as they are, and there'd be less complaints of givin' way to stimilants; and gentlemen which should be above blackenin' a pore woman's character would have no call to throw their Sairy Gampses and Betsy Prigses in a lone female's face," said this member of the Gamp species.

CHAPTER XI.

BY THE SEA.

PSYCHE and the Zephyrs waited the last touches of the master's hand; but William Crawford painted no more. The eminent oculist would not give him any decided opinion as to the ultimate restoration of his sight.

"We must wait," he said; "you must give me time."

The painter obeyed his medical adviser implicitly; and after pursuing a certain course of treatment for a certain time, he went with his servant Dimond to a little sea-coast village in Dorsetshire,—still in accordance with the oculist's advice. Change of air,—change to a better and purer air than the atmosphere of Kensington,—could do no harm, said the oculist, and might possibly effect some good.

William Crawford begged the oculist to select for him the loneliest and quietest spot he knew of; and to that spot he went, travelling by a night-train, with a green shade over his poor useless eyes, and the factotum who had served him since the beginning of his prosperity for his sole companion and attendant.

As yet he had told his dismal secret to no one but the oculist and the man-servant. Friends and acquaintances called at the Fountains, and were told that Mr. Crawford was ill. Was it any thing serious? O no,—nothing serious; he had over-worked himself,—that was all. The painter could not bring himself to reveal his sorrow even to his best friend; he could not bring himself to confess that his career had come to an end—that a living death had fallen upon him in the zenith of his fame. All through the long, dark, empty days,—the perpetual night of his existence,—he brooded upon his trouble: never any more to behold the beauty of the universe; never again to be the mortal creator of immortal loveliness. There are no words which can describe his despair when

he thought that his career had ended,—that his hand would never again wield a brush, his eyes never more be dazzled by the splendour of his own colour.

He prayed night and day; but he could not bring himself yet to repeat the inspired words which had formed his nightly and daily supplication before the hour of his calamity. He could not say, "Thy will be done." He cried again and again, "O Lord, restore my sight—restore my sight!"

He thought of other men on whom the same calamity had fallen; but on those men it had fallen so lightly. Milton's grandest thoughts found their expression after the outer universe had become a blank to him. Beethoven achieved that which was almost a triumph over the impossible when his genius survived the loss of his hearing; but O, what anguish the musician must have endured when his fingers wove those divine harmonies which he was never to hear! For the sightless painter what hope remained? Henceforward there could be no light upon William

Crawford's pathway but the pale radiance of past glories.

While his misfortune was yet new to him, the painter gave way to utter despair: he complained to no one—he demanded no mortal pity; but hour after hour, day after day, he sat in the same attitude—dead in life. He knew that he had many friends who would have been inexpressibly glad to give him comfort in these bitter days; friends who would have done their best to cheer his desolation with pleasant talk, grave reading, music, poetry, the stirring news of the outer world, the airy gossip of coteries. He could not bring himself to accept such consolation yet. The very thought of friendly companionship made him shudder.

"I shall never paint any more," he cried; "I shall never paint any more. The young men would talk and think of me as they talk and think of the dead. They would be kind, and pity me; but I don't want their pity. I want to show them that I have not emptied my sack, and that there is progress for me yet."

One day the painter groped his way to the

easel on which the Psyche still stood, shrouded with dismal drapery. He plucked the veil from his divinity, and passed his tremulous hands over the canvas. They were hands as yet unused to groping in the dark, and he had none of the subtle delicacy of the blind man's touch; but when he came to patches of solid colour here and there, he fancied he recognised familiar portions of his work.

"My Psyche's hair," he murmured; "I can feel the undulating touches of the brush; and here are her shoulders, the rounded pearly shoulders! Yes, yes, I remember; there was a thought too much of the palette-knife hereabouts."

He laid his face against the canvas presently, and some of the bitterest tears that ever fell from manly eyes dropped slowly on the picture which he could not see.

He was very glad to leave his own house and to escape from the inquiries of anxious friends and acquaintance. He had a nervous dread of any revelation of his calamity.

"Would *she* be sorry for me?" he thought;

for even in this dark hour of his life his fancy took a forbidden flight now and then, and hovered about the lady of the Hermitage. "Would she be sorry? No; she would only be interested in me as a new kind of lion. She would come and beseech me to show myself at her parties. She would pet me, and exhibit me to her friends as the blind painter—the last new thing in drawing-room celebrities. No; I will not accept her pity—I will not sink so low as that. I will go and hide myself in some quiet corner, and let the world believe that I am dead, if it will."

Not even to his daughter had William Crawford confided his sorrow. She was far away from him—at Pevenshall—surrounded by gaieties and splendours; and what need had he to darken her young life with the knowledge of his affliction? He dictated a letter to the factotum Dimond, in which he informed Flo that he had hurt his hand, and was for that reason unable to write himself, but that he was in excellent health, and was on the point of starting for the seaside for a few months' rest and quiet.

The sea-coast village chosen by the oculist was one of the loneliest spots within the limits of civilisation. There was no fear of any observant stranger recognising William Crawford in the melancholy-looking gentleman who walked listlessly to and fro on the sands, leaning on his servant's arm, and never looking to the right or left. The little hamlet consisted of a cluster of fishermen's cottages, a general shop, and a rude village inn, where the voices of the fishermen might be heard sometimes after dark roaring the chorus of some barbarous ditty. One of those speculative individuals who are continually roaming the face of the earth, with a view to ruining themselves and other people in the building-line, had discovered that the air of Callesly Bay was the balmiest that ever restored healthful roses to wan and faded cheeks, and had erected an hotel, which might have had some chance of success at Brighton or Biarritz, but which was about twenty times too large for the possible requirements of Callesly Bay. Advertisements had appealed in vain to the British public. The one sheep that leads the other sheep

had not yet been tempted to jump through this special gap in the hedge; and the Royal Phœnix Hotel and Boarding-house, with every possible attraction for noblemen and gentlemen, was a dreary failure. So much the better for William Crawford. What did he care if the waiters were listless and the cooking execrable? For the last four or five months of his life he had been in the habit of eating without knowing what he ate; and just now the most perfect achievement of culinary art would have been as dust and ashes in his mouth.

Callesly Bay suited the painter. His servant informed him that, with the exception of an invalid lady, who went out daily in a Bath-chair, and a paralytic gentleman, who took the air at his bedroom window, he was the only occupant of the great barrack-like hotel. This knowledge brought a sense of tranquillity to the painter's mind. In this quiet retreat he was safe. Here at least there were no prying eyes keeping watch at his gate; no journalists, eager for information about every body and every thing, and ready to dip their pens

into their ink-bottles to spread the tidings of the painter's calamity in less than five minutes after those tidings reached their greedy ears.

Day after day, day after day, William Crawford paced the sands of the bay upon his servant's arm, and felt the soft ocean-breezes on his face. There is no calamity so terrible, no affliction so bitter, that habit will not temper its anguish to the sufferer. Little by little, sweet Christian resignation began to take the place of dogged Pagan despair. The grief which had fallen upon him lost the first sharpness of its sting. The past, with all its artistic pride and triumph, drifted away from the present; until it seemed to the painter that his blindness was an old familiar sorrow, and the days of his work and ambition strange and remote. Sweet fancies began to visit him as he walked slowly to and fro amid the scene of tranquil beauty which he could imagine but not see, and the subtle sense of the painter melted into the subtler sense of the poet. It is impossible for the mind of such a man to remain barren. There is in such a soul a divine light that cannot be extinguished. If the

painter did not see that calm English bay in all its glory of sunrise and sunset, he saw a fairer bay, and a brighter sun going down behind enchanted waters. All the splendours of dreamland unfolded themselves before those sightless eyes. The peerless mistress of Praxiteles arose from a sunlit sea, beautiful as when Apelles beheld in her the type of his goddess. The shadows of the past grew into light in the blind painter's fancy. He forgot himself and his own loss while thinking of fairer creations than his own. The very breath of the ocean brought divine images to his mind. It was not the coast of Dorsetshire which he trod: the sands beneath his feet were the golden sands of fairyland; the sea whose rolling waves made music in his ears was the sea that carried Æneas to Dido; the fatal ocean that bore Telemachus to Calypso; the wave that licked the white feet of Andromeda; the waste of waters on which a deadly calm came down when Agamemnon launched his Troy-bound fleet, and offended Diana visited the impious hunter with her wrath.

"If I ever live to paint again, I will do something better than Dido or Psyche," said William Crawford; for as the deep gloom of his despair vanished before the divine light of poetry, he felt a wondrous power in his fettered hands; and brooding hour after hour on the pictures which yet remained to be painted, it seemed to him as if new lights had dawned upon him in the day of his darkness—lights that would abide with him for the rest of his existence, and guide him in his future work—if God were pleased to give him back his eyesight.

He had been at Callesly Bay for more than a month, and the ocean-breezes were beginning to lose their balmy summer warmth. He had grown accustomed to his affliction,—perfectly resigned, very tranquil. Day by day he took the same walks, picturing to himself the changing beauties of the scene, and sometimes even questioning the matter-of-fact Dimond as to appearances in the sea and sky. Within the last two or three weeks he had begun to take some faint interest in that outer world to which he had once

belonged; and the factotum, who read a little better than the majority of his class, beguiled the evenings by the perusal of the newspapers, and sometimes even tried his hand upon a pocket-edition of Shakespeare borrowed from the landlord of that splendid failure, the Royal Phœnix.

On one especially beautiful autumn afternoon the painter more keenly than usual felt the want of some companion a little more refined—a thought more sympathetic than Dimond the factotum.

He had paced the sands till he was tired, and had seated himself on a low rock, on which it had been his habit to sit since his first coming to that quiet shore. Sitting here, with the faithful Dimond by his side, Mr. Crawford abandoned himself to the influence of the balmy air. He knew that at such an hour and with such an atmosphere there must be unspeakable beauty in the western sky—delicious gradations of colour which he was never more to see; and he would fain have wrung some translation of that unseen beauty from the prosaic lips of the factotum.

"Is the sun low, Dimond?" he asked.

"Yes, sir,—uncommon low. I never did see any thing like the sunsets in these parts—they've got such a sudden way with them."

"I thought the sun was low. I can feel a light upon my face; there is a light upon my face,—a red light, isn't there, Dimond?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the sky? I'm sure the sky is very beautiful—isn't it, Dimond?"

"Well, yes, sir; it's a very fine afternoon; but, if my corns don't deceive me—asking your pardon for talking of 'em, sir—there'll be some rain before long," added the prosaic Dimond.

"Never mind your corns, Dimond," exclaimed the painter impatiently; "I want you to tell me about the sky. I have always fancied one might do something good with an Andromeda standing out in sharp relief against an evening sky; with nothing but the rock, and the low line of purple sea, and with one white sea-gull hovering on the edge of the water," he soliloquised; while Dimond looked doubtfully to windward and pondered on the prophetic shootings of his corns.

"Tell me about the sky!" cried Mr. Crawford; "a broad band of deep rose-colour melting into amethyst; and then a pale transparent opal—eh, Dimond?"

"I don't know about opal, sir; but there's a bluish and greenish way with it—something like that bad lumpy glass you see sometimes in wash-house windows."

"Wash-house windows! O Dimond, go home and get me Shakespeare,—the second volume of the tragedies,—and I'll give you a lesson in reading. You shall read me the description of Cleopatra before we go back to dinner."

The factotum obeyed, nothing loth to escape from that trying cross-examination about the sky; and the painter sat alone by the sea, listening to the low harmonies of the waves and pondering that possible picture of Andromeda. He could fancy every curve of the beautiful rounded form, sharply defined against a sombre background of rock; the dark streaming hair; the white, lovely face faintly tinged with the last rays of sunset; the sad despairing eyes looking seaward for the

monster. Andromeda's pale beauty filled the painter's mind. He heard the dull moaning of the pitiless waves, the sighing of the night-winds amidst the victim's hair; he could almost fancy he heard the swooping wings of the deliverer's steed; and thus beguiled by sounds that were not, it is scarcely strange that he did not hear sounds that were,—the silken rustling of a woman's dress, the soft fluttering of a woman's shawl.

"I may dream of pictures; but I shall never paint again!" cried William Crawford hopelessly.

A gentle hand was laid upon his arm as he spoke; and he awoke from that vision of Andromeda to know that there was a living, breathing woman by his side.

"O yes, you will paint again, Mr. Crawford. The trial is a bitter one; but, please God, it will not be enduring. Why did you leave me to find out what had happened?"

"Mrs. Champernowne!"

"Yes; the woman whose friendship you rejected so cruelly last April, and who comes now to offer it once more—on her knees, if you like.

I think one might almost venture to fall upon one's knees in this delightfully lonely place."

"Mrs. Champernowne!"

"Call me Georgina," said the widow, in her lowest and most harmonious accents. "I have come to offer you my friendship; and to-day friendship means any thing you like. I have learnt to hate my own selfishness since that day at Kensington. I have learnt to know that a woman cannot live her own life; that the time will come sooner or later when the presence of one dear companion will be necessary to her existence, when the loss of one friend will take every charm from her life. I have missed you so cruelly, William,—so cruelly. You don't know what a dreary season this summer just departed has been to me."

"My darling, can I believe—can I imagine—"

This waking dream,—the tender words sounding in his ears, the tender hands clinging round his arm,—seemed to the painter to constitute a far wilder vision than any dream of Andromeda.

And yet it was all a sweet reality: the tender hands were warm with life, and sent a magnetic thrill to the very core of his heart.

"My darling, do you want to make me mad? O Georgina, your presence here is like nothing but a dream. But if I wake presently to find that you have been trifling with me, I shall die. The anguish of such a disappointment would kill me."

"Do you know that you have behaved very badly to me?" said the widow. "You must have known that I loved you. Remember how humbly I besought your friendship; and you scorned me and sent me away, just because I was not ready to renounce my precious liberty at a moment's notice for your pleasure. I think you might have had patience with me a little longer, Mr. Crawford. Rubens would never have had three wives, if he had not shown a little more forbearance to womanly caprice. But I forgive you that offence. What I cannot forgive is your cruelty in letting me remain ignorant of this sorrow that has come upon you lately. You ought to have known that

the more uncertain and hard to please a woman may be in a general way, the more fitted she is to play the ministering angel on occasions. Yes, Mr. Crawford, it was very cruel of you. All through the summer I have been thinking of you, and wondering about you,—wondering what you were doing, wondering why you did not relent and come to see me. It was only this morning that I learned what had happened, from a little gossipping paragraph in a newspaper. I ordered my carriage, and drove straight to the Fountains, where I *made* the servants tell me your whereabouts."

"My darling, my angel! Are you laughing at me, Georgina? or may I really call you by these dear names?"

"You may call me any thing you please, if you will call me your wife by and by. Helen Vicary is with me. I only gave her twenty minutes' notice about the journey. Do you know what I said to her?"

"No, indeed, dearest."

"I am going down to Dorsetshire, Helen, to

ask Mr. Crawford to marry me. Pack your things immediately, and be sure you put a white dress in your trunk; for in all probability I shall want you to be my bridesmaid."

"Mrs. Champernowne, this is pity! I will not accept such a sacrifice. My calamity has fallen upon me by God's will, and I will bear it bravely. I will not trade upon it in order to win from a woman's generosity that which I could not obtain from her love."

"Was there ever such a provoking creature?" cried Mrs. Champernowne. "Must I reiterate the confession of my folly? I did not know what I was doing that day when I rejected your love. It was only afterwards, when the days and weeks went by and I was obliged to endure my existence without you—it was only then that I knew I had lost something without which life was worthless to me. Am I to tell you again and again how dearly I love you? I have loved you so long, that I cannot tell you when my love began. But it is possible that my humiliation comes too late. You have learnt to forget me, or worse, perhaps

you have learnt to love some one else as you once loved me."

"To forget you—to love another woman after having known you—my idol—my goddess! I love you to distraction. My only fear is that compassion, generosity, self-abnegation—"

"Self-abnegation! You ought to know that I am the most selfish of women. But here is your servant. Will you take my arm to go back to the hotel? I have apartments in the same hotel, and poor Helen is waiting for her dinner. Will you tell your servant to follow us, and trust yourself to *me*, William?"

Would he? The sweet magnetic thrill went to the core of his heart once more as Georgina Champernowne slipped her wrist under his arm. How gently she guided his footsteps! how easy the walk was to him by her side! He was no longer blind. He possessed something better than eyesight, in the protection of the woman he loved.

Before the month was out, there was a quiet wedding at Callesly Bay; and the letter which gently broke to Florence the tidings of her father's

affliction was no ill-spelt missive from the factotum, but an affectionate feminine epistle, signed "Georgina Crawford," and written when the painter and his wife were on the eve of a journey to Italy.

CHAPTER XII.

A COMMERCIAL EARTHQUAKE.

THE autumn wore away, and the Pevensall coverts afforded sport for a succession of visitors. This second autumn of Mr. Lobyer's married life was very much like the first. The only change worthy of record was the fact that day by day Flo saw less of her husband, and more of Sir Nugent Evershed. Howden Park was so near the millionaire's handsome dwelling-place, and Sir Nugent was such a popular person, that it was scarcely strange if the young mistress of Pevensall deferred to him in all her arrangements, and considered no dinner-party complete without his presence. If Mrs. Lobyer had elected the elegant young baronet as her chief friend and adviser, there was no one to gainsay her election. Vague murmurs and piquant little whispers might cir-

culate freely within a given radius of Pevenshall; but Florence was, of course, the last person likely to hear the little whispers, and not by any means a person to be warned or affrighted by the first breath of scandal if it had reached her.

Cecil was ill in London; Mr. Crawford was loitering on a sweet honeymoon ramble in the fairest pathways of Italy; and Mr. Lobyer was absorbed in gloomy watchfulness of the money-market and the cotton-trade, on the horizon of which prosaic world a great cloud had been gathering during the last few months. There had been awful crashes in the commercial world: thunderbolts falling suddenly in the fairest places. Mr. Lobyer and his Manchester friends held solemn conclave in the millionaire's snuggery, and discoursed of the failures amongst the mighty with grave ominous faces, but with a certain unction and relish nevertheless.

Florence did not even pretend to be interested in the commercial crisis or the commercial earthquakes. "Every body in our way is being ruined, I understand," she said gaily to her intimates at

the breakfast-table. "Gray shirtings are obstinately bent on being dull, and those foolish people in America are putting us to all sorts of inconvenience; and every body who sells cotton is going to be ruined—at least, that's what I gather from the gloomy tenor of Mr. Lobyer's conversation. But that sort of thing is a monomania with very rich people, is it not? The more billions a man possesses, the more obstinately he broods upon the idea that he must ultimately die in a workhouse. I have heard of men with billions cutting their throats under the influence of that idea about the workhouse. But seriously I do hope that we shall not be ruined. It would be so dreadful to have one's carpets hung out of the upstair windows, and dirty men making inventories of one's china."

Thus discoursed Mrs. Lobyer in her gayest and most delightful manner, to the extreme amusement of her chosen friends, to whom the cabala of the cotton-trade was as dark a mystery as to herself. But there were one or two grave business men seated at that sumptuous breakfast-table to whom

Mrs. Lobyer's frivolous talk seemed like the twittering of some innocent bird, which is premonitory of a tempest.

The painter's daughter went her own way, and there was no friendly hand to stay her progress on that dangerous path which a woman is apt to take when she wanders at her own sweet will. She was not happy. Already the glories and splendours of her life were beginning to grow flat and stale. She had sold herself for a price, and the price had been freely paid to her; but of late she had begun to wonder whether the barter of womanly pride and maidenly purity had been made on the most profitable terms within the possibilities of the matrimonial market. Pevenshall Place was a most lordly mansion; but it seemed a poor thing to be mistress of a parvenu's dwelling-place, when in the remote depths of her inner consciousness lurked the conviction that she might have reigned in the quaint old tapestried chambers of Howden, and held her place among the magnates of the land, by the indisputable right of rank, instead of the half-

contemptuous sufferance accorded to money. She was not happy; that faculty for womanly tenderness and devotion which constitutes woman's highest charm and most perilous weakness had not yet been awakened in this young wife's heart. Sir Nugent Evershed's companionship was very agreeable to her; his devotion was the most delicious food supplied to that all-devouring monster, feminine vanity. But no pulse in Florence Lobyer's heart beat the quicker for the baronet's coming; no blank place in her life bore witness to his absence when he left her. She liked him; and she bitterly regretted not having met him in the days when she was Florence Crawford. But if there was indeed one tender spot in her heart, one remnant of girlish romance still lingering in her breast, it was not this elegant baronet, but a dark-eyed, bearded young painter, whose image was enshrined in that one sacred corner of the worldly soul. Sitting alone in her room, Mrs. Lobyer was apt to look pensively at Philip Foley's little *chef-d'œuvre*, and to wonder about the painter as she looked.

"I daresay he is married by this time," she thought, "and has set up a house for himself somewhere in that dreadful Islington. I can fancy his wife one of those gigantic creatures whom vulgar men call fine women," mused Flo, as she lifted her eyes to the *duchesse* glass in which her slender little figure was reflected.

But if the one green spot in the arid waste of a worldly nature was given to the landscape-painter, it was no less certain that Sir Nugent Evershed's presence was eminently calculated to endanger the domestic peace of Pevenshall. If his delicate consideration, his quiet homage, his apparently unselfish devotion did not imperil Flo's position as a wife, they had at least the effect of rendering her husband day by day more hateful in her eyes. She had never liked him, but she had married him with the honest intention of trying to like him; just as some people go through their lives with the intention of learning the German language or thorough bass. She had tried perhaps a little, but had speedily given up the attempt in despair. And from the hour of her rencontre with Miss de

Raymond she had considered herself privileged to dislike and despise the man whom she had married.

She had quarrelled with him for the first time in her life during the last few weeks; and though the dispute had arisen out of some trifle scarcely worthy of remembrance, it had not been the less bitter. Hard words had been uttered on both sides; the hardest perhaps by the impetuous Flo, who was apt to say even more than she meant when she felt herself aggrieved and injured.

"Thank you very much for all the civil things you've said to me, Mrs. Lobyer. I think I know *you* pretty well after the charming candour with which you have favoured me to-day; but I don't think you quite know *me* yet. You are very young and very inexperienced, and you have a lesson or two to learn before you are much older. I hope I may have the satisfaction of teaching you one of those lessons."

This was Mr. Lobyer's parting-speech as he left his wife's apartment. The vague threat occasioned Florence neither alarm nor anxiety. She would have been ready to apologise to her husband,

if he had given her the opportunity of doing so; but any thing in the nature of a threat was eminently calculated to steel her heart against the lord and master whom at the best she had only tolerated.

After this domestic storm there came a deadly calm, during which the husband and wife treated each other with frigid politeness; but little by little the storm-cloud passed away from Flo's sunshiny nature, and she drifted back into the good-humoured nonchalance of manner with which she had been wont to accept Mr. Lobyer, and all other necessary evils.

Of late Mr. Lobyer had been, if possible, even less agreeable than usual. A dense gloom had come down upon him; and systematically as his guests were wont to ignore his presence, there were times when he brought a chilling influence into the brilliantly-lighted drawing-room, as of a man newly arrived from some frozen region, and bearing the icy blasts of that region in the folds of his garments. Flo made one or two feeble attempts to penetrate this gloom—merely as a matter of duty—but found herself rudely repulsed.

So she concluded that the monomania which is the peculiar chastisement of billionaires had attacked her husband, and that his gloomy musings were darkened by the shadow of a workhouse. After having come to this conclusion, she troubled herself with no further anxiety on a subject which was foreign to the usual current of her thoughts. Mr. Lobyer went his way, and his wife went hers; and that delightful calm which generally reigns in households where husband and wife are utterly indifferent to each other reigned for a while at Pevenshall, and might have continued, if a most insignificant event had not occurred to cloud the serene horizon. The insignificant event was the resignation of one of those superb creatures the matched footmen. How the calamity arose Mrs. Lobyer was unable fully to ascertain; but it appeared that the master of Pevenshall had expressed himself to the superb creature in language which such a creature, knowing his own value, could not and would not brook from any master living. The footman had immediately tendered his resignation, had received his salary, and de-

parted, leaving his brother lacquey in lonely grandeur, and as much deteriorated in value as a Sèvres vase which has lost its companion vase.

Flo did not hear of her loss till the man had left Pevenshall. On receiving the dismal tidings she abandoned herself for the moment to despair.

"They were so exactly the same height," she cried piteously, "and the same breadth across the shoulders. One might get two men the same height easily enough, I daresay; but what is the use of that, if one man is a lifeguardsman and the other a threadpaper? And now Jones is gone, Tomkins is positively useless, unless I can match him. O Sir Nugent, you really must assist me to find a decent match for Tomkins."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Lobyer; "I'll have no more of your matched footmen; fellows who are as insolent on the strength of their legs as your *primi tenori* on the strength of their voices. I know a man who can take Jones's place at a minute's notice."

"But will he match?" exclaimed the despair-

ing Flo; "that is the question—will he match Tomkins?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," answered Mr. Lobyer coolly. "He'll suit me, and that's enough."

Florence opened her eyes to their widest extent, and remained for some moments staring fixedly at her husband, as in a trance. Brutal though the man was by nature, he had chosen heretofore to let his wife exercise unquestioned authority in all household arrangements; and that he should interfere with her now, that he should come between her and those sacred symbols of her state, the matched footmen, was something more than she could understand.

For a moment her breath seemed to fail her; but she recovered herself presently, and replied with fitting dignity,

"You may engage what servants you please, Mr. Lobyer; but I decline to be waited upon by any one who does not match Tomkins."

After which Mrs. Lobyer summoned the housekeeper, and requested that functionary to make

arrangements for the earliest possible filling-up of the hiatus in the servants'-hall; and having so far asserted her position, Flo resumed the occupation of the moment, and dismissed the subject of the twin lacqueys from her thoughts.

At dinner, however, she was reminded of her bereavement by the appearance of a stumpy, pale-faced man, in a livery which was a great deal too large for him; but who moved about amongst the other servants with a quiet self-possession and a noiseless footfall which spoke well for his past training.

She saw no more of this man till the following day, when he came into the morning-room, where she happened to be for a few minutes alone with Sir Nugent, trying a new song which he had brought her. The strange footman came into the room to remove some flowers from a *jardinière* in one of the windows. Flo turned round from the piano to see what he was doing.

"Who told you to move those geraniums?" she asked.

"One of the gardeners sent for them, ma'am."

The man performed his duty noiselessly, and retired.

"I don't like that man!" exclaimed the baronet, as the door closed on Mr. Lobyer's *protégé*.

"He seems a very good servant; but he doesn't match Tomkins," sighed Flo.

"He does his work quietly enough," answered Sir Nugent; "but he is not *like* a servant."

"How do you mean?"

"There's something in his manner that I don't like; a watchfulness—a stealthy, underhand kind of manner."

"Is there? I haven't noticed it. He might be as stealthy as an assassin in an Italian opera—so far as I am concerned—if he only matched Tomkins."

After this Mrs. Lobyer took no further notice of the servant who had been hired by her husband in place of the splendid Jones. She submitted to his presence very patiently, relying on the ultimate success of her housekeeper's researches amongst magnificent creatures of the Tomkins stamp. But Sir Nugent Evershed—who had no

right to take objection to any arrangement in the house at which he was so constant a visitor—could not refrain from expressing his dislike of the strange footman; while that individual, by some fatality, seemed always to be on duty during the baronet's visits.

"I think you must have a mystical attraction for the man, as strong in its way as your antipathy to him," said Flo; "for I very seldom see him except when you are here. Really the prejudice is so absurd on your part that I can't help laughing at you."

"I never could endure a sneak," answered Sir Nugent; "and that man is a sneak. I will tell you something more than that, Mrs. Lobyer—he is not a footman."

"Not a footman! What is he then? Surely not a gentleman in disguise!"

"Decidedly not; but he is no footman. There is an unmistakable stamp upon a footman—a servants'-hall mark—which is not on that man."

Mr. Lobyer heard nothing of the baronet's objection to his *protégé;* for Mr. Lobyer had ab-

sented himself from Pevenshall of late, and was heard of now in Manchester, now in London, anon in Paris. There were vacant chambers now in the luxurious mansion; for as her guests of August and September dropped off, Mrs. Lobyer did not care to invite fresh visitors without the concurrence of her husband. Even while going her own way, she had always made some shadowy pretence of deferring to his wishes; and he was in a manner necessary to her—a social lay figure without which her drawing-room was incomplete. His spasmodic departures to Manchester had not interfered with the arrangements of the mansion; but now that he was absent day after day and week after week, Mrs. Lobyer felt herself called upon to maintain a certain sobriety in the household over which she presided.

Visitors who had been staying in the house dropped off; and no other guests came to fill the vacant chambers. No invitations were issued for dinner-parties or hunting-breakfasts in the millionaire's absence. Major and Mrs. Henniker, and one inane young lady, were now the only

guests; and Florence would have found the spacious rooms very dreary if it had not been for the perpetual droppings-in of Sir Nugent Evershed, whose horses spent the best part of their existence between Howden and Pevenshall.

He came perpetually. There was always some pretext for his coming—some reason for his loitering when he came. He had turned architect and philanthropist, and was intensely interested in those schools and cottages which Flo was going to build; and the plans, and specifications, and estimates for which were the subjects of interminable discussion. Sometimes deaf Mrs. Henniker, sometimes the inane young lady, played propriety during these long visits of the baronet. Sometimes, but very rarely, Sir Nugent and Mrs. Lobyer sat alone in the drawing-room or morning-room, or strolled up and down the terrace on some fine autumnal morning, discussing the schools and cottages.

It was upwards of a month since the new footman had replaced the splendid Jones; and during the best part of the man's service Mr. Lobyer had been absent from home. Flo's spirits drooped in

the empty house. She suffered acutely from that dismal reaction which is the penalty that must be paid sooner or later by all who have tried to create for themselves a spurious kind of happiness from perpetual excitement. The long dreary evenings sorely tried Mrs. Lobyer's patience. Mrs. Henniker's Berlin-wool work, the inane young lady's performances on the piano, the Major's long stories of Indian warfare, were all alike vanity and vexation to her; and she must have perished for lack of some distraction, if it had not been for her schools and cottages and Sir Nugent Evershed.

He came to Pevenshall one cold October afternoon, when Major Henniker had driven his wife and the inane young lady to Chiverly on a shopping expedition, leaving Florence alone in the drawing-room with a very ponderous historical work newly arrived from the London librarian; a work which the young matron set herself to read with a desperate resolution.

"I really must improve my mind," she said; "my ideas of history have never soared above Pinnock, and I have all sorts of old-fashioned

notions. I don't want any thing at Chiverly; so I shall stay at home this afternoon, dear Mrs. Hemfiker, and devote myself to the Tudors. I am going to read about that dear, good, high-principled Henry VIII., who has only been properly understood within the last few years."

When the pony-phaeton had started with her three guests, Mrs. Lobyer ensconced herself in one of the most luxurious of the easy-chairs and opened her big volume in a very business-like manner. The day was cold and windy, and fires burned cheerily at both ends of the spacious apartment.

Perhaps no historical work has ever yet been written in which the first half-dozen pages were not just a little dry. The grave historian has of late years borrowed many hints from the novelist, but he has not yet been bold enough to make a dash at his subject *in medias res*, and to start his first chapter with "*Ventre St. Gris*," said the king, "I have heard enough of this matter, and will brook no further parley; the man dies to-morrow!" Nor has he yet deigned to wind himself insidiously into his theme under cover of two

travellers riding side by side through the sunset.

Mrs. Lobyer was beginning to yawn piteously over a grave disquisition upon the merits and demerits of feudalism and villeinage, when a servant announced Sir Nugent Evershed.

"My dear Sir Nugent, this is kind of you," cried Flo, closing the big volume with a sigh of relief; "I didn't expect to see you again for an age after the dreary evening we gave you on Tuesday."

"I have never spent a dreary evening in this house," answered the baronet, as he laid his hat and riding-whip on a little table, and seated himself in a low chair very near Flo's; "you ought to know that, Mrs. Lobyer."

There was some shade of intention in his tone; but Florence Lobyer was accustomed to that tone, and knew how to parry all such impalpable attacks.

"Indeed, I do not know any thing of the kind," she said in her liveliest manner; "I thought you might possibly be a little tired of

Major Henniker's Indian stories. You must have heard some of them several times. But he certainly tells them well."

"I confess to being heartily tired of them notwithstanding. But the attraction which brings me to Pevenshall, in spite of myself sometimes, is not Major Henniker."

Flo gave that little look of innocent surprise which is always at the command of a thoroughpaced coquette.

"You have brought me some new idea for my cottages," she said, pointing to a roll of paper in the baronet's hand.

"Yes; I have a friend in Oxfordshire who has built schools for his poor, and I've brought you a sketch of his buildings."

After this there was a good deal of discussion about the merits of Tudor architecture as opposed to the Swiss-cottage or Norman-tower style of building. And then the baronet and Mrs. Lobyer began to talk of other things; and by some subtle transition the conversation assumed a more interesting and a more personal character; and Flo

found herself talking to Sir Nugent more confidentially than she had ever talked to him before, in spite of their intimate acquaintance. They had been so much together, and yet had been so rarely alone, that there had been little opportunity for confidential converse between them. This October afternoon, with the early dusk gathering in the room, and the fires burning red and low, seemed the very occasion for friendly confidence. Flo talked with her usual candour of her father, herself, her husband, the empty frivolity of her life; and all at once she found that the conversation had assumed a tone which every experienced coquette knows to be dangerous. Sir Nugent was beginning to tell his companion how terrible a sacrifice she had made in marrying Thomas Lobyer, and how bitterly he above all other men mourned and deplored that sacrifice.

Even at this point Flo's liveliness did not desert her.

"Please don't call it a sacrifice, Sir Nugent; nothing annoys me so much as for my friends to take that tone about me," she said. "I married

Mr. Lobyer with my eyes open, and I have no right to complain of the bargain. He has given me every thing he ever promised to give me."

"But can he give you the love you were created to inspire? No, Florence; you know he cannot give you that. There is not a field-labourer on this estate less able to comprehend you or less worthy of your love than the man you call your husband."

Before Florence could reprimand her admirer's audacity he had pounced on the little hand lying loosely on the cushion of her chair, and had lifted it to his lips. As she drew it indignantly away from him, and as he raised his head after bending it over the little hand, he uttered a sudden exclamation and started to his feet, looking across Mrs. Lobyer's head at the great glass-doors of the palm-house, which opened out of the drawing-room.

"I knew that man was a spy!" he exclaimed, snatching his riding-whip from the table.

"What man?" cried Flo, alarmed by the unwonted fierceness in Sir Nugent's face.

"Mr. Lobyer's footman. He has been amus-

ing himself by listening to our conversation. I recognised his agreeable face flattened against one of those glass-doors just this moment. Don't be frightened: there is not the least occasion for alarm; but I must ascertain the meaning of this man's insolence."

The baronet went into the palm-house, and closed the doors after him. Flo followed him to the doors, but could follow him no farther; for she found that he had bolted as well as closed them.

"Why did he do that?" she thought. "I hope he is not going to make any *esclandre*. What does it matter if the man did listen? I daresay many servants are fond of listening."

She looked through the doors, but it was very dark in the palm-house; and if Sir Nugent and the footman were there, she could not see them. There were other glass-doors opening on to the terrace, and in all probability the man had made his escape by that way.

"I hope Sir Nugent won't be so absurd as to follow him," thought Flo. "He is getting very

tiresome. I suppose he has been allowed to come here too often. I shall have to be dignified and make a quarrel with him."

She stood peering into the darkness for some time, but she could neither hear nor see any thing in the palm-house. She went to one of the windows and looked out upon the terrace, but she could see nothing there; so she seated herself by the fire, and waited very impatiently for Sir Nugent's return.

She had been waiting more than half an hour when he came back through the palm-house.

"Well," she cried; "what does it all mean?"

"It means that the man is a private detective set to watch you by your husband," answered Sir Nugent quietly. "I daresay a person in that line of life gets a good many thrashings; but I don't think he can ever have received a sounder drubbing than the one I've just given him."

"A detective, set to watch *me!*" echoed Flo, with an air of stupefaction.

"Yes, Florence. I made the man acknowledge his calling, and name his employer. If

you doubt me, he shall repeat his confession for your satisfaction. Those sort of fellows think nothing of going over to the enemy. I have made him anxious to serve me by the promise of handsome payment; and I have made him afraid to disoblige me by the threat of another thrashing. The proceeding is worthy of your husband, is it not?"

"But what does it mean?" cried Flo; "what in heaven's name does it all mean?"

"I am ashamed to tell you."

"But I insist on knowing."

"You insist?"

"I do."

"And you will not reproach me for any pain my revelation may cause you?"

"No, no."

"Then if you ask me what I really think of this detestable business, I will tell you my thoughts in the plainest words. I think your husband is a scoundrel, and that he has placed that wretched sneak in this house in the hope that he might be able to trump up some flimsy evidence against your

truth and honour as his wife; evidence that would serve Mr. Lobyer in the divorce-court."

"Evidence against *me!*—the divorce-court! Are you mad, Sir Nugent?"

"No, Florence; I am only telling you the naked truth in all its hideousness. Forgive me if the truth is horrible to you. I wrung the worst part of that truth out of the spy's throat just now, when I caught him and grappled with him yonder. He spoke pretty plainly; for I think he knew he had never had a nearer chance of being strangled than he had at that moment. Mrs. Lobyer, your husband's conduct has been an enigma to me from the first day in which we met in Switzerland; but in the happiness I found in your society I was content to leave that enigma unsolved. To-day, for the first time, I read the riddle. Thomas Lobyer hated me as a boy; Thomas Lobyer hates me as a man. He has chosen to cultivate my acquaintance down here because my acquaintance happened to be useful to him amongst people with whom wealth does not stand for every thing. He has made use of me, hating me while he did so,

and holding himself in readiness for the first chance of vengeance. And now he thinks the chance is in his hand; and you are to be sacrificed to the meanest spite that ever festered in the heart of a villain."

"I don't understand," murmured Florence helplessly; "I don't understand."

"It is difficult for a woman to understand such baseness. Your husband has set his spy to watch you. He knows that you are good, and true, and pure; but he knows something else besides that."

"What does he know?"

"He knows that I love you, Florence. Yes, the time has come in which I must speak plainly; the time has come in which you must leave this house, which is no longer a fitting shelter for you. Mr. Lobyer knows that I love you,—has known as much, in all likelihood, for some time past; but he has waited very patiently for his opportunity, and the opportunity, as he thinks, has arrived. He has set his spy to watch us, and no doubt the spy is by this time well up in his lesson."

"What lesson? What has the man to dis-

cover?" cried Flo indignantly. "You must know, Sir Nugent Evershed, that if you had dared to speak to me before to-day as you have spoken now, you would have been forbidden this house."

The fragile little figure seemed to grow taller by two or three inches as Mrs. Lobyer reproved her admirer. She felt as much outraged by his audacity as if no spice of coquetry had ever tainted the purity of her nature. She was just one of those women who may balance themselves for ever upon the narrow boundary-wall between propriety and disgrace and never run the smallest risk of toppling over on the wrong side.

"If this man is a spy, I have no fear of him," she exclaimed resolutely. "Let him go back to his employer to tell of his wasted labour."

"Such a man as that will not allow his labour to be wasted. Your husband does not want to hear the truth: he is ready to accept any falsehood that will serve his purpose; and that man is a less-accomplished rogue than I take him for, if he cannot get enough out of the tittle-tattle of the servants'-hall to make a case for some pettifogging

lawyer; a case that will break down ignominiously perhaps, but which will be strong enough to tarnish your name for ever and ever."

Florence looked at her lover with a colourless, bewildered face, in which there was a brave expression of defiance nevertheless. Sir Nugent Eversbed was not a good man; and if Thomas Lobyer the parvenu had basely plotted the disgrace and ruin of his young wife, Sir Nugent the country gentleman was not above profiting by the *roturier's* baseness. He did not think there was any infamy in his conduct. He admired Florence very much. He loved her as much as it was natural to him to love any body except himself, and he felt most genuine indignation against her husband. But he felt at the same time that this shameful business came to pass very conveniently for him, as it was eminently calculated to bring matters to a crisis; just as he was beginning to be rather tired of a flirtation which had pursued its even tenor for the last twelve months without giving him any firmer hold upon the heart of the woman he loved.

The crisis had come; and he discovered all at once that he, the accomplished courtier, the experienced Lovelace, had been very much mistaken in his estimate of this pretty, frivolous, coquettish young matron. He had expected to find Florence Lobyer utterly weak and helpless in the hour of trial; and lo! to his surprise and confusion, she turned upon him resolute and defiant as a heroine, and he felt his eyelids droop under her fearless gaze.

"Why do you tell me this?" she asked. "If the tittle-tattle of the servants'-hall can injure my good name, it is you who have brought that injury upon me. If your visits here in my husband's absence have been too frequent, the blame lies with you, who have had twice my experience of the world, and should have protected me against my own imprudence. I have trusted you as a gentleman and a man of honour, Sir Nugent Evershed. Am I to think that you are neither?"

"Think nothing of me, except that I love you, Florence, and that I am only anxious to protect you from a scoundrel. The presence of

a hired spy in this house, and the confession I wrung from the spy, are sufficient evidence of a deep-laid scheme. You must leave this house, Florence."

"I must, must I?" Mrs. Lobyer repeated innocently; "but when, and how?"

"To-night," whispered the baronet; "and with me."

Flo made her lover a low curtsey. "I ought to be very much flattered by your desire to burden yourself with me at the very moment when it seems my husband is trying to get rid of me," she said; "but I have no intention of leaving Pevenshall, Sir Nugent. If my husband has been pleased to set a spy over my actions, it shall be my business to show him that I am not afraid of spies. But it is a quarter to seven, and I must run away to dress. Good afternoon, and good-bye, Sir Nugent. Perhaps so long as the detective remains, and Mr. Lobyer stays away, it will be just as well for you to discontinue your visits."

"As you please, Mrs. Lobyer," answered the baronet with a stately sulkiness.

He retired from the apartment, and waited in the portico while his horse was being brought round to him. He had known what it was to fail in his character of a Lovelace before to-day; but he had never before experienced a failure so ignominious and unexpected.

Flo tripped off to her room, smiling defiance upon insolent admirers and private detectives; but when the door of her dressing-room was closed behind her, and she found herself alone in that sacred chamber, she buried her face in the pillows of a low sofa and burst into tears.

"What a miserable, empty, frivolous life it is!" she cried; "and what a despicable creature I am!"

The private detective disappeared from Pevenshall after his encounter with Sir Nugent Evershed. Flo made some inquiries about the man next day, and was informed by her housekeeper that he had left in a most mysterious manner, without a word of warning.

"But I never liked the man, ma'am," said the housekeeper; "there was something under-

hand in his manner, and I always used to feel a cold shivery sensation when he came near me."

Sir Nugent Evershed came no more to the splendid mansion on the hill; and Mrs. Lobyer waited very quietly for whatever Fate had in store for her. There was no sign of Mr. Lobyer; neither letter nor message to announce his coming. The inane young lady returned to her relatives; and Flo was fain to entreat her dear Major and Mrs. Henniker to remain with her, lest she should be left quite alone in that spacious dwelling.

"I might send for my aunt Jane," she thought, when she brooded upon her position; "but I think a very little of aunt Jane would be the death of me just now."

A change came over the spirit of the young matron. She was no longer the airy volatile creature who had wasted her days in skipping from one amusement to another, in exchanging an extravagant toilette of the morning for a more extravagant toilette of the afternoon. She under-

took a gigantic enterprise in the way of Berlin-wool work, and sat hour after hour by her dear Mrs. Henniker's side, counting stitches and picking up glittering beads on the point of her needle. She listened with sublime patience to the Major's Indian stories; and yet all this time the traditionary fox was gnawing its way to her heart, —emblem of all hidden care courageously endured.

She knew that a crisis in her life had come. She knew that there was something ominous in Mr. Lobyer's long absence, his obstinate silence. She remembered the foolish recklessness with which she had provoked and defied scandal. Above all, she remembered Mr. Lobyer's vague threat on the occasion of her one serious misunderstanding with him; and connecting that threat with the spy's presence, and Sir Nugent Evershed's positive assertions, Florence Lobyer saw herself menaced by no small danger.

Her husband was a scoundrel; she had known that for a long time. False to her from first to last himself, he was yet quite capable of wreaking

some terrible revenge upon her for the shadow of falsehood to him.

"I know that he can be pitiless," she thought; "I remember his face that day after our quarrel; and I know that I have no mercy to expect from him. I have not been a good wife, and I can scarcely wonder if he wishes to get rid of me; but if he had loved me when he married me, honestly and truly, as I believed that he did, I think I should have done my duty."

Mrs. Lobyer waited very patiently for the unknown danger which she dreaded from her husband's vengeance; but the days and weeks drifted by, and no prophetic cloud darkened the quiet horizon. This dull period of suspense was the most painful ordeal she had ever been called upon to endure in all her thoughtless life; and it is to be recorded to her credit that she endured it bravely.

The cloud appeared at last—a big black cloud, but not prophetic of that social tempest which Flo had dreaded. The cloud was the shadow of commercial failure. At first faint rumours came to

Pevenshall; then more definite reports; at last the fatal tidings. The greatest of all the great crashes of the year was the crash with which the master of Pevenshall went to ruin. The pitiless Money Article recorded the great man's destruction very briefly: Mr. Lobyer, of the Lobyer Cotton-mills, and King Street, Manchester, of Mortimer Gardens, Hyde Park, and Pevenshall Place, Yorkshire, had failed for half-a-million.

The next tidings that came to Pevenshall were of even a darker nature; so dark and terrible indeed, that Major Henniker felt himself called upon to despatch two telegrams in Mrs. Lobyer's interest, —one to Rome, where Mr. Crawford and his wife had newly arrived; the other to Russell Square, summoning Mrs. Bushby post-haste to the succour of her niece.

Before Mrs. Bushby could arrive, Florence had discovered that some new calamity had befallen her, and had extorted the dismal tidings from the lips of the Major himself.

The commercial crash had only been the first

act of the social tragedy. There had been a second and more terrible act. While the news in the Money Article was still fresh upon men's lips, Thomas Lobyer had shot himself through the head in his Manchester counting-house.

The details of his ruin are not worth recording here. By what false moves upon the chessboard of commerce, by what mad lust for gain, by what sudden impulses of caution at moments when rashness would have been prudence, by what reckless speculation in the hour when timidity would have been salvation, by what fatal steps upon the speculator's downward road he had hurried to his destruction, can have little interest here. It may be set down to his credit as a thoroughly practical and business-like person, that no act of generosity had ever made him the poorer by a sixpence, and that no honourable scruple had ever hindered him from enriching himself at the expense of other people. His iron hand had closed relentlessly upon every chance of profit, his iron heart had been adamant to every plea. If the end of all was failure, he had at least some title to the respect

of the practical; and no man could insult his memory by that half-contemptuous pity which a money-making world bestows on the good-natured ne'er-do-weel, who has been no one's enemy but his own.

THE EPILOGUE.

AFTER the terrible crash which ended her brief married life, Florence Lobyer took shelter with her aunt Bushby until such time as her father should return to England and be able to receive her at the Fountains. Tender letters, dictated by that generous father, and written in Georgina's elegant Italian hand, came to comfort the poor terror-stricken young widow.

No Aladdin palace floating skyward through the thin air ever vanished more completely from its sometime possessor than the splendours of Pevenshall vanished from her who had once been the queen of that gorgeous mansion. Of all the grandeurs of her married life Mrs. Lobyer did not carry away with her so much as a trinket. Iron-hearted functionaries swooped down upon the

noble dwelling which honest, hard-working Thomas Lobyer the elder had created to be an abiding monument of an industrious and honourable career, and the widow was given to understand that the gown upon her back and the wedding-ring on her finger were about the only possessions she had any right to carry away with her.

Poor Florence was glad to part with the costly frivolities for which she had sold herself; she was glad to separate herself from every evidence of that ill-omened bargain. She looked back upon her past life with unspeakable horror. The letters found in her husband's desk had confirmed Sir Nugent Evershed's suspicions of that husband's baseness. They contained ample proof that Thomas Lobyer had been engaged in the attempt to get up evidence against his wife's honour at the moment when commercial ruin overtook him, and that he had plotted a vengeance that should involve the enemy of his boyhood and the wife of whom he had grown weary in the same destruction.

It was scarcely strange, therefore, if Florence was glad to escape from Pevenshall, and from

every thing associated with her married life. She secluded herself in one of the remoter chambers of her aunt's house, and would see no one except Lady Cecil, who had early tidings of her friend's affliction, and who came to see her, looking very pale and weak after that tedious illness through which Mr. O'Boyneville had nursed her so patiently.

The two women embraced each other tenderly. For some minutes Cecil sat in silence with Flo's slender black-robed figure folded in her arms. Then they talked a little in low suppressed voices of the dreadful event which had occasioned the wearing of that dismal black raiment.

"You must come to Chudleigh Combe with Laurence and me," Cecil said by and by. "Mr. O'Boyneville has bought the dear old place where I spent my childhood, Flo. It was the negotiation about the purchase which took him away from Ravenshall that time. O Florence, I can never tell you how good he has been to me. I shall never dare to tell you how unworthy I have been of his goodness. But we are very happy

now—thank God, we are completely happy now. He nursed me all through my long illness; and I used to wake and see him watching me in the dead of the night, when I was too languid to speak, and powerless to tell him that I was conscious of his goodness. It was in those long night-watches that I learnt to understand him; and now I think there is nothing in the world that could come between us."

This was all that Cecil said about herself. She stopped with her old friend for some hours; and in the course of their conversation it transpired that Major Gordon had gone to Spanish America with a party of savants and explorers, on a mission which involved as much peril as could be found on any battle-field.

Flo accepted her friend's invitation, and spent some weeks in the old-fashioned house surrounded by Devonian woodland, and within sound of the low murmur of the sea. She stayed with Cecil till she was summoned to the Fountains, where her stepmother received her with quiet tenderness that was infinitely soothing, and where she found

her father just beginning to hope that he might live to paint his Andromeda.

"I am equal to either fortune," he said, turning his face towards his wife, illumined by a more beautiful smile than even his pencil had ever transferred to canvas; "for in Georgey I have something better than mortal eyesight. I have been so happy as the poor blind slave of my Delilah, that I am almost afraid I may lose something by regaining my sight."

In that bright peaceful home, with all fair and pleasant images around her, Florence found it easy to forget the past. Sometimes when she lingered before the glass, arranging the bright rippling tresses under her widow's-cap, the image of Sir Nugent Evershed flitted through her brain.

"I was weak enough to think that he really loved me, and that if I had been free, he would have been at my feet," she thought with a blush; "and though I have been a widow nearly a twelvemonth he has never come near me, or made the faintest sign of any interest in my fate. It was very pleasant to flirt with the foolish mistress of

Pevenshall Place, but Sir Nugent is too wise to marry a bankrupt cotton-spinner's widow. I begin to think there is only one person in the world who ever truly loved me."

That one person is an individual who is rising gradually in the estimation of his fellow-men as a landscape-painter, and who comes to the Fountains now and then on a Sunday evening, and seems always glad to find his way to the quiet corner where Florence sits in her widow's-weeds. If the sombre dress—invested with a grace by the artistic hands of Mrs. Crawford's milliner—happens to be very becoming, it is no fault of the young widow, who owes her present charm to no coquetry of manner, but rather to a pensive gravity, which the dismal close of her married life has left upon her. She is so young and so pretty that no one looking at her can doubt for a moment that the hour must come sooner or later when a new life will begin for her, and a bright future open itself before her thoughtful eyes like a sunshiny vista in one of Philip Foley's landscapes. There are people who venture to prophesy that

the landscape-painter will be the happy individual for whose enchantment those dismal draperies of black will be transformed into the white robes of a bride.

Meanwhile life glides smoothly by at the Fountains. Never was ministering slave more devoted to an idolised master than the elegant Georgina to her husband. The bronzes, and cabinet-pictures, and Persian carpets, and Angora cats have been removed from the Hermitage to Mr. Crawford's dwelling; and the little retreat in the lane near Hyde Park is again in the market, at the moderate rent of 700*l.* per annum. It is scarcely necessary to say that Mrs. Champernowne's admirers were surprised and indignant when the tidings of her marriage fell like a thunderbolt amongst the ranks of her victims; but Time, which brings resignation to all earthly mourners, has consoled the idolaters of the widow, and they flock to the Fountains, as they flocked to the Hermitage, to burn incense at the shrine of the most charming woman in London.

The one trouble of Mr. Crawford's married

life has been but of brief duration, for the painter has regained the use of his eyes in time to see his daughter in her widow's-cap, and in time to begin his Andromeda before the success of his Dido has been forgotten by the most fickle of his admirers.

Amongst the Sunday-evening visitors at the Fountains appear very often Mr. and Lady Cecil O'Boyneville. The barrister has fought his way into the House of Commons; and there is some talk of his speedy elevation to the bench. He has removed his household gods from Bloomsbury to sunnier regions within sight of the verdant vistas of Kensington Gardens; and Mrs. MacClaverhouse tells her niece that she has reason to be thankful to the Providence that has given her so good a husband and so handsome an income.

Cecil lives to look once more upon Hector Gordon's wedding-cards; but this time the sight brings her no pang of regret. She hands the little packet to her husband with a smile and says:

"I am so glad he has married again; and I hope he will be as happy—as we are."

The barrister looks up from his *Times* to reply with a vague murmur; and then resumes his reading. But presently he looks up again with his face radiant.

"I knew Valentine would make a mess of his defence in Peter *versus* Piper!" he exclaims; "that's a case I should like to have had the handling of myself!"

THE END.

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